A Lancer Gothic Original

LARGER TYPE EASY EYE NON-GLARE PAPER

Julie Wellsley

TWO FACES OF FEAR

The first face was that of Evil—
would the second be that of Death?

Never Before Published

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LANCER EASY EYE EDITIONS

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CHAPTER 1

"Sooner you than me, Miss," said the red-headed conductor, removing his ticket machine and placing it in a small black tin. It was the last trip of the night and he knew they wouldn't be picking up any more passengers now. Only Mary James remained on the single-decker bus speeding along the dark, tree-lined road, and she would be getting off at Beach Lane, which led up to Seacliff House.

Everyone else had alighted at the small cobbled square in the little fishing village nestling at the foot of the towering cliffs. Mary had watched them rush to the fish-and-chip shop with the steamed-up windows, and had realized for the first time that she was hungry.

She had eaten nothing on the train from London except her sandwiches and a cup of coffee in the Griddle Car. Nurses' pay didn't run to railway lunches.

She smiled up at the conductor. She was dark-haired and pretty, with soft brown eyes and a smooth olive complexion. He didn't like the idea of her going to a place like that.

"Yes," he grunted, glancing out at the dark countryside flashing by, "much sooner you than me."

"Why do you say that?"

"You'll find out soon enough. It's a desolate, crumbling old ruin slowly tumbling down into the sea. You

can't get staff to stay in places like that. Maid, ar you?"

"A nurse."

He looked interested. He explored his right ear wit a probing finger.

"Wax," he said. "I should go to the doctor's, bu that syringe always gives me the creeps. Someone sic up there? Who?"

"Mr. Winchley."

"I've heard about him. What's he like? No one seen him except from a distance."

"I don't know. We've never met."

"Sent by a London doctor, were you?"

"Something like that."

"So you haven't been this way before?"

She shook her head and her dark hair dance lightly against her cheeks. Smashing, he thought, re smashing—but she won't stay. Not when she's see where she's going.

"It's on the cliff," he said. "Big old place, bit like castle with its towers. I bet it's as breezy as anythin up there."

"That will be nice," she smiled. "And healthy to after the smell of petrol and diesel fumes in London

"Draughty and damp, more likely. A lot of it is ruins. Mr. Winchley hasn't been there very long."

"I didn't know."

"It was empty for a long while and then it w rented by a Mr. Prebble. Someone said he'd won a pi on the pools, but he hadn't been there more than couple of weeks when he was found dead on the roc below. From what I heard, one of the old balconi looked as though it had crumbled away—"

She gave a little shiver. "Poor man. How awful!"

"Thought I'd tell you, warn you like, that some of these old places can be dangerous."

"Thank you. I'll remember . . ."

"Real tough that, especially if he had come into some money. But there—" He shook his head mournfully, "That's life."

She gazed through the window, but it was too dark to see anything. She had known the house was on the coast, a pretty spot she had been told, overlooking a bay; wild, rugged, desolate. But she didn't really mind. She needed a change of air and had grown weary of nursing that cantankerous old woman in Knightsbridge.

She had no responsibilities; she could go anywhere, and when Dr. Framling had offered her this job she had leapt at it.

She had felt stifled in London. She had hated the crowds, queueing for buses, the rumble of traffic, the noise, the monstrous steel and glass skyscraper buildings, the rush and bustle. She always had done so.

She had been an only child and her father had died when she was three, leaving behind a pile of debts. He was an unsuccessful builder, and throughout her life, her mother had had to struggle against near-penury. They had moved from the neat, semi-detached house in South London and had lived for a time in a small, damp flat on the top floor of a Victorian house, with cracked stone steps leading up to a glass-panelled front door.

Her childhood was spent playing hopscotch on the pavement outside, hide-and-seek among the cars

parked outside the drab house, or on occasions, in the nearby park. She had loved the park more than anything; the diamond-shaped flower beds, vivid with color in the summer, the friendly park-keeper, the tall, leafy trees where the birds sang and—most of all—the lake where she could fish for guppies and watch the young men and girls in the rowing boats.

She would have loved to go on the lake and it was in those days she missed her father. Even if her mother could have rowed, she hadn't the time, for time was money to the unfortunate woman who struggled to keep their modest home together. When Mary left school she already knew that she wanted to be a nurse. She had studied hard, and the day she qualified was the happiest day of her life.

That had been two years ago, and she still had no regrets.

The bus sped down a hill and in its headlights she saw the high hedges, caught a brief glimpse of a stone-built cottage in the darkness and then the bus was climbing up out of the hollow.

"Pardon?" The conductor's voice interrupted her thoughts.

"We're almost there?"

"Oh, thank you—"

The bus was beginning to slow and finally ground to a stop.

"This is as far as we go, I'm afraid. "He picked up her case and got out, helping her down.

"Thank you," she murmured again.

"I'll show you—"

He walked round to the front of the bus and in the

glare of its lights she saw the opening of a lane on the other side of the road. It was cold after the warmth of the bus; a chill breeze tugged gently at her long dark hair. The sky was dark and stormy and there was rain in the air.

"It's about a mile down there. You'll come to Fiddler's Cottage first, on your left. Just keep straight on—"

"You're very kind," she said, as he handed her her case.

"No trouble. I'd have thought they'd have sent a car to meet you, though." He sounded worried. Poor kid, he thought, she looked tired. She must have been traveling nearly all day.

"I expect they did, but I came on a later train. There had been an accident, a derailment near Bodmin, so they're probably not expecting me until morning now."

He looked concerned.

"You ought to have put up in the village . . ."

She should have done, of course, but funds were low. It would have meant arriving at the house absolutely penniless and she didn't want to do that.

"I shall be all right, honestly. And thanks for everything."

"Okay." He waved. "Good luck. We come past three times a day. I'll look out for you."

He waved again, the gears ground, and the bus lumbered away, soon to be swallowed up in the darkness. Picking up her case, Mary started down the narrow lane. There had been a moon earlier, but now it was blotted out by heavy clouds that scudded overhead.

They didn't look very promising, she thought with a sinking heart, and if she didn't hurry she would be caught out in the storm.

She had gone no more than a dozen yards when a raindrop splashed on her face, then another and another. Within seconds the rain was lashing down.

"Oh, no! I'll be soaked!"

She glanced about her desperately. Lightning sizzled across the dark sky, making her jump, and was followed almost immediately by a clap of thunder. Thunder always frightened her; it was silly, but she couldn't help herself, and the thought of taking shelter beneath the trees—always a dangerous thing to do—filled her with alarm.

She glanced about her anxiously. The skies had opened and the rain was beating down, stabbing against her face like needle-sharp darts, and it was then she saw the shadowy outlines of an old barn. She could take shelter there—

Tightening her grip on her case she began to stumble along the deeply rutted track away to her left, which was fast becoming a horrible, squelching quagmire. Another dozen yards and she plunged through the open doorway of the barn. She was breathing heavily, her breasts rising and falling from the exertion.

She lowered her case to the ground and brushed her hair back from her wet face. What a disastrous day it had been! First the derailment, causing the delay, and now this wretched storm. Her hair would be ruined—and she had had it specially set for this new job. What a waste of money!

Overhead, the rain drummed on the roof. A clap of

thunder, more violent than the last, made her recoil, and she glanced about her uneasily, retreating a little from the open doorway. It was very dark in the barn, which seemed to be stacked with bales of hay or straw. It was warm and stuffy, too, and her nose began to itch.

She sneezed and fumbled in her pocket for her handkerchief. As she did so, she froze. Was it her imagination or had she heard something rustle there in the darkness?

Was someone sleeping here—a tramp, perhaps? Or had it been merely a rat?

Her blood went cold at the thought; she was terrified of the things.

The rain continued to hammer a remorseless tattoo on the barn roof and a puddle was forming outside the open doorway. Nevertheless, she moved closer to the door, glancing nervously over her shoulder. Nothing happened, but her eyes were wide and watchful, heedless now of the rain that bounced on the muddy ground and spattered against her shoes and stockings.

The minutes ticked by and when there came no further movement from inside the barn, her tensed nerves relaxed. She couldn't see what the time was, but she knew it must be nearly eleven. What a mess! Folks went to bed early in the country; she might have to wake someone at the house; not a very good start for a new job!

Quite suddenly she realized that the rain was no longer drumming on the roof. It was drizzling now, no more. She could hear the raindrops dripping on the inevitable tin or rusty old piece of farm machinery that one finds near old barns.

She stood in the doorway and peered out. There were occasional flashes of lightning, but it was a long time before it was followed by the faint rumble of thunder, and she realized that the storm had passed out to sea.

She picked up her suitcase, and it was then she heard the rustling noise again, nearer this time.

With a little gasp she glanced quickly over her shoulder, her heart hammering aginst her ribs. Something was moving on the far side of the barn; something dark and menacing. She waited to see no more.

She squelched out of the barn into the lightly falling rain. She stumbled down the muddy track. Once she almost fell as her right foot slid beneath her in the soft mud. Somehow she managed to keep her balance and hurried on, her breath rasping in her throat. Reaching the narrow lane, she swung right, running along it until she felt her heart would burst.

Now she could hear padding footsteps behind her and then, horribly, a low sniggering laugh.

She screamed and plunged on, still clutching her case. Her lungs were near bursting, there was a red mist swirling before her eyes, and harsh, choking sobs came from her lips. She knew that she was slowing down, that she couldn't go on for much longer. She was exhausted and a dreadful pain was hammering in her left eye—the darkness ahead was beginning to spin and whirl, stabbed with exploding lights.

Then suddenly she saw the cottage—long, low, with a light glowing in one of its downstairs windows.

A sob escaped her as she flung herself through the gateway and up the path to the front porch. She hammered frantically on the door panels.

"Let me in! Oh, please let me in!" she sobbed, and glanced frantically over her shoulder.

She heard a muttered exclamation from someone inside the cottage, then the tread of hurrying footsteps. Light streamed out as the door opened.

She almost fell into a man's arms.

"Somebody's following me!" she gasped, then everything went black before her eyes and she knew nothing more.

When she came round she realized that she was lying on a long, chintz-covered settee. For a moment she lay there, gazing up at the oak-beamed ceiling, puzzled and bewildered, wondering where she was. Then her experience of a few moments before came flooding back into her mind and she gave a quick cry of fear.

Immediately a woman spoke; softly and sympathetically. An arm went around her shoulders, raising her.

"It's all right, my dear." The faint aroma of lavender filled Mary's nostrils; she saw a kindly-faced woman bending over her, lifting a glass to her lips. "Here, drink this, it will make you feel better."

Mary sat up, supported by the woman's arm, sipping the golden liquid, which sent a warm glow spreading through her veins. She realized then that the woman was not alone. In the background, standing by the door, stood a tall, broad-shouldered young man. He was looking at her, his expression sympathetic.

Mary coughed and spluttered as some of the fiery liquid caught in her throat, but she was no longer afraid. The brandy had steadied her nerves.

"There's some color coming back to your cheeks!" said the old lady. "That's good!"

She had her head cocked to one side. Her hair, streaked with grey, was brushed closely to her head. She had a small, oval-shaped face and lively, intelligent eyes. Her skin, although creased with fine lines, was deeply tanned as though she spent much of her time out of doors—which in fact she did, as Mary later learned, for she loved pottering about the garden.

"I think she's going to be all right now, Peter."

"Splendid!" He had a deep, pleasant voice, and now he came closer. Mary sensed that he had deliberately stood back out of sight when she recovered consciousness for fear that sight of a stranger might alarm her afresh. She was grateful for the thought.

"I'm much better now, thank you," she said. "You've been terribly kind. I'm sorry if I alarmed you, but—"

"Don't be silly, my dear, there's nothing to apologise for. It must have been a dreadful experience. My name is Freda, by the way, Freda Johnson, and this is my nephew, Peter."

"Perhaps if you feel better you could tell us what happened in greater detail, Miss James," said the man.

"You know my name?" She was surprised.

"It was on your case, which you had dropped in the lane," he said with a smile.

She colored. "Oh yes, of course. Thank you for—for getting it for me. Did you . . ."

"Did I see anyone?" He offered her a cigarette which she accepted thankfully. He thumbed his lighter and

held it for her. He had rugged, attractive features and very nice blue eyes.

"Sight of you must have scared away whoever it was," his aunt said, gazing at him fondly. "A big chap like you . . . But I mustn't babble on. I'm not giving Miss James a chance to explain."

"Please call me Mary." She went on to tell them what had happened when she had taken shelter in the barn.

Peter's eyes narrowed. He was well over six feet tall, broad-shoulders, fair-haired, with an engaging smile. He wore a purple shirt with a silk square tied carelessly at his brown throat, and fawn slacks.

"You didn't see him then?" His voice was low and attractive. She could have listened to it for hours, she thought.

"No. I heard this sound in the barn. I thought perhaps it was a tramp sleeping there, or a rat. When it happened a second time—this rustling sound—I just fled."

"You saw nothing at all, my dear?"

"No, but he had a high-pitched, sniggering laugh. It—it was horrible!"

"I'm sure it must have been. What a shocking experience. And *you* saw no one, Peter?" She turned to her nephew.

He shook his head. "As you say, I probably frightened him away. May I ask what you were doing in the lane at this time of night, Mary?"

"I was on my way up to the house—"

"Seacliff House?"

"Yes, I'm a nurse, you see. You probably know that Mr. Winchley is unwell and—"

"You mean you're going to live there?" Peter put in, rather sharply, she thought.

"Yes."

"I . . . see."

"Well, I do think someone could have met you with the car!" his aunt said tartly. "That housekeeper could have been waiting at the station for you." She sniffed; she seemed to disapprove of the housekeeper at Seacliff House.

"They probably did, but I missed my train. There was a derailment at Bodmin."

"So there was, I remember now." Freda glanced at her nephew. "I heard it on the radio, Peter, just before you came in. What a pity you didn't see Mary—you could have given her a lift. But there, we've talked enough." She got to her feet. "It sounds as though the kettle's boiling and I'm sure you'd like to have a wash, Mary."

"I would, if it's not too much trouble." Mary looked down ruefully at her muddy stockings. "I *would* like to look a little more presentable before going up to the house. But I hate to put you to all this trouble."

"No trouble at all, my dear. I would have suggested it sooner but you'll find we're a bit primitive in the country, I'm afraid. No proper bathroom, and no hot water, but you can change in the spare bedroom and—" She broke off. "That gives me an idea. You must stay the night, Mary."

"It's very, very kind of you, but I couldn't possibly put you to so much trouble—"

"Nonsense! It's no trouble at all."

"Aunt will love having you," smiled Peter.

"Of course I shall. It's not often I have company.

Peter doesn't visit me as often as he should . . ." She eyed him with mock disapproval, and Mary laughed.

"Well, if you're sure—"

"Of course I'm sure. Besides, they'll have all gone to bed at the house now. It's gone midnight. Peter can run you up in the car tomorrow morning after breakfast. You need a good night's sleep, then you'll feel thoroughly rested.

It really was very kind of them both to take in a complete stranger, Mary thought a little later, as she snuggled down into bed. When she had gone back downstairs, after washing and changing, she had found supper ready: cold ham, spring onions, lettuce and hot chocolate. Freda Johnson seemed to her a very sweet old lady, and she liked Peter, too. He said he was down for a short holiday and would be glad to show her some of the local beauty spots on her days off.

She felt drowsily happy as she lay on the faintly-scented pillows in the little bedroom under the eaves. The scent of honeysuckle drifted in through the open window, and she sighed contentedly. How wonderfully peaceful it was, after London.

Had she known what the future held for her she might have wished she had never come to Seacliff House.

CHAPTER 2

"The cottage is only a stone's throw from Seacliff House, as you'll soon discover," Freda said at breakfast the following morning. "So I do hope you'll look in and see me—when your duties permit, of course."

"There's nothing I'd like more," Mary said warmly. "You've been so kind to me, made me feel so welcome. I thought at first I would be lonely coming to an isolated spot like this. I shall probably wear out my welcome!"

"You will never do that, my dear. Now, do help yourself to some more marmalade, I made it myself."

It was a bright, sunny morning and Mary had awakened early, feeling thoroughly refreshed. She had washed in her bedroom then wandered in the secluded garden, which was surrounded by an old red-brick wall. The morning scent of the flowers had filled the air, the sun was warm on her face, the lawn glistened with dew, and the horror of the previous night seemed little more than a bad dream.

She had helped Peter's aunt prepare the breakfast of fresh farm eggs, crisp bacon, sausages and kidneys, despite her protests that she should relax in a deckchair in the rose-covered loggia.

"Peter's already gone down to the beach," Freda explained. "He didn't like to wake you, otherwise you could have gone with him."

"I would have loved it! He should have called me. I was awake quite early."

"Oh, didn't you sleep well?" asked the old lady anxiously.

"Like a top!" laughed Mary. "Peter has gone swimming?"

"No, he's taken his paints down."

"He's a painter?"

"Not in the sense that I think you mean. I have a little beach chalet in Smugglers' Cove and it's badly in need of a coat of paint. Peter promised to do it when he came down for a few days."

"He doesn't live locally then?"

"Good heavens, no! London. Quite honestly I didn't expect to see him so soon, and of course I was delighted. One gets lonely sometimes, when one is getting old. Friends pass away . . . But Peter has been very good to me. He often comes down for weekends, to see if I am all right."

"What does he do?" Mary asked curiously.

"He's a clerk or something in one of those Government Offices, but he's thinking of leaving and trying his hand at the Travel Bureau business—holidays and so on. But I expect he'll tell you about it himself. He says if he does I can go abroad whenever I fancy, but I'm quite content with my little cottage here."

"You've always lived here, on the coast?"

"Practically all my life. Jim—that's my husband, God rest his soul—had a small teashop on the coast; it was there I met him. I had come down for the weekend, and we fell in love at first sight." Her bright eyes twinkled up at Mary. "At least, *I* fell for him right away—and made up my mind to get him."

Mary laughed. There was something very lovable about Peter's aunt.

"We were very happy together," Freda sighed. "I have some wonderful memories—and memories are what you live on when you get older. But here am I, babbling on, and here's Peter, ready for his breakfast too, I expect."

"Hi, everybody." Mary could not fail to notice the appreciative glance Peter gave her. She colored and her heart beat a little faster.

Over breakfast, in the sunny, oak-beamed dining room looking out on to the garden, with its flowers dancing in the faint sea breeze, Peter asked his aunt if she had met the new owner of the house on the cliff.

"No, Peter. He seems to keep very much to himself. But it could be because he isn't a well man. What is his trouble, Mary?"

"A kidney infection, I believe, and he has a weak heart."

"There does seem to be a lot of sickness about these days," Freda said. "As soon as we find a cure for one disease we seem to be faced with another . . . I know the cook, of course, Mrs. Latham; she's a local, but they do say he has a very attractive housekeeper —and *she's* definitely not a local."

"I see." Peter looked thoughtful.

His aunt looked at him curiously. "What's bothering you?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Nothing, really . . . I was looking at the house from the beach this morning; it's a gloomy old place. Much of it is little more than a ruin. I hope you'll be all right there, Mary."

"Of course I shall," she smiled. "Why shouldn't I

be? It can't be any more gloomy and depressing than the place I've just left. Heavens!" She glanced at her watch. "I hadn't realized it was so late. Shall we get on with the washing-up, then I must be off—"

"I wouldn't dream of it," said Freda firmly.

"I'll get your case and put it in the car," Peter said.

A few minutes later Mary was sitting beside him in the low-slung sports car, the sea breeze tugging at her hair. She had thanked Freda for her kindness and had promised to call in again as soon as she was free.

The lane was narrow and winding, climbing all the time, and when they finally came in sight of the old house Mary saw that Peter had not exaggerated. It stood on a pinnacle of rocks high on the cliffs and looked out over the sea—a rambling building of gray, weatherbeaten stone, with crumbling towers or turrets. Its walls were creeper-covered, the windows were grimy, and it had an air of desolation and decay. There seemed something sinister about that ancient stone sentinel and unconsciously Mary gave a little shiver.

"I see what you mean . . . It isn't very cheerful. But it probably looks a lot better inside."

"I doubt it," Peter said soberly. He braked outside the high porch and hurried round to open the car door for her. He lifted out her case. "However, you won't have to spend your evenings here, if I can do anything about it, I'd like to see you on your first evening off."

"I'd like that very much. And thank you both for everything. As soon as I know what my duties are, and what time I'll have off, I'll let you know."

"I'll ring you tomorrow," he said.

He stood beside the car, tall, broad-shouldered and smiling, yet there was something in his eyes that puzzled her. Was it anxiety, a reluctance to leave her here? She couldn't be sure. Then the expression was gone and he was holding out his hand.

"I'll be counting the minutes until I see you, Mary."

He gave her fingers a warm, quick squeeze, then with a cheery wave of his hand he vaulted back into the car. Mary watched it roar away down the drive and out of the narrow lane, blue smoke belching from the exhaust.

She thought she glimpsed a corner of a curtain lifting at one of the second-floor windows, and someone watching her, but she could have been wrong—it might have been the breeze. She put down her case in the dark, lofty porch. There was a tub on either side of the door in which geraniums struggled to survive, for it was plain they had not been watered. As Mary lifted her hand to the old-fashioned knocker, the door creaked open.

"You'll be the nurse, I suppose." The woman who stood in the hall was plump, with tired eyes and a faint discoloration, which could have been a birthmark, along one side of her chin. "Come in, my dear. I'm Mrs. Preston, the daily help."

"Thank you. My name's Mary—Mary James."

She smiled a greeting and stepped into the dark, gloomy hall. It was large and high-ceilinged, with a stone floor on which her footsteps echoed hollowly, the sound seemingly flung back from the faded white walls. There was a small table to her right, littered with newspapers and an ash-tray filled with cigarette

ends. The air smelt stale, as though the windows were never opened. A narrow passage ran beside the wide oak staircase with its faded and well-worn carpet.

"Mr. Winchley's not up yet, but you'll find Miss Miller—she's the housekeeper—in the study. That's the second door on the left."

Mary placed her case at the foot of the staircase and, knocking on the study door, went in. It was a large square room lined with bookshelves which rose along all four walls to the ceiling. There was an Adam fireplace, where logs spat and hissed, and faded velvet curtains at the windows. There were three ancient easy chairs and a heavy, old-fashioned Chesterfield, which stood on a square of carpet in the centre of the room. A small desk stood beneath a window overlooking the terrace.

The books were leather-bound and looked as though they had not been disturbed for years. Many of them were stained, for the room was damp. Over the years rain had penetrated the walls and in some places the plaster was crumbling.

A young woman in her late twenties stood with her back to the blazing fire.

"You managed to get here then, Nurse?" Her voice was cool, her wide blue eyes appraising.

"Yes. I'm sorry I'm late, but there was a derailment and—"

"That's all right, there's no need to apologize." The girl smiled faintly. "It doesn't matter. Mr. Winchley is pretty easygoing. I'm Sonia Miller, the housekeeper, by the way—"

She stubbed out her cigarette with a peculiarly indolent, almost bored gesture. Mary had had little ex-

perience of housekeepers but she had always had the impression that they were usually stout, motherly, mature women. Sonia was none of these. She was young, blonde and shapely, and would have looked more at home lying on a beach in a bikini, or lounging on a stool in some exclusive bar on the Riviera, than in carrying out the duties of housekeeper in this gloomy old cliff house.

She had long golden hair that streamed down over her shoulders like a waterfall, her mouth was full and generous, but slightly overpainted. She wore a tight-fitting mini-dress that emphasized her richly curved figure—she was, in fact, nothing like Mary had imagined the housekeeper of a large mansion would be.

Sonia said: "I expect cook can rustle you up some breakfast. I suppose you came on the early train?"

"As a matter of fact, I arrived last night."

"You did?" She raised carefully-pencilled brows. "Oh! Max met the first train, but after I heard about the derailment . . . Where did you sleep?"

Mary told her, and she looked even more surprised when she explained how she came to be there.

"You mean somebody tried to attack you last night?"

Mary shrugged; she really didn't want to talk about it any more. The sooner the incident was forgotten, the better. "No—but he certainly followed me."

Sonia's eyes narrowed. "Hmn, queer . . . And you say he laughed."

Mary gave a little shiver. She thought it would be a long time before she forgot that horrible sniggering chuckle.

"Yes. It was rather . . . frightening."

Sonia's lovely eyes were searching her face. She seemed to be trying to make up her mind about something, and her intent look made Mary feel uncomfortable.

Suddenly she smiled. "I didn't think our local ghost was the laughing kind," she said.

"Ghost?" Mary was astonished.

"Maybe I should have held my tongue—at least until you'd settled in. But I've no doubt you would have heard the story sooner or later from cook, or Mrs. Preston. I sometimes think it was because of their silly gossip that Nurse Eldman—your predecessor—left in such a hurry."

"I see." It was the first Mary knew of a predecessor. Dr. Framling had not mentioned it. Perhaps he had thought it unimportant.

"Of course," Sonia went on, "this ghost business is a lot of nonsense. But Eldman swore that she saw it one night when she was coming back from the village. Walked through the wall, according to her story. Personally I think she'd had a drop too much to drink; she was fond of a tipple, you know, apart from the fact that she was knocking about with a fisherman. And you know what *they* are—" She smiled again, expressively.

"But *you* haven't seen it?" Mary asked.

"No. And I've been here three months. Still, I suppose an old house like this *could* have a ghost. When Eldman saw this alleged apparition, I started checking on the house's history. It's about six hundred years old and was built by a wealthy merchant for his current mistress. Legend has it she died here, in the pool in the grounds, from a knife-wound. It seems her pro-

tector had grown tired of her and hired an assassin to kill her—a Londoner, I believe. Over the years she's supposed to have been seen in the house and in the grounds—and apparently she's not adverse to an occasional nocturnal stroll in the lane."

"I'm sure it wasn't a woman I heard laughing," said Mary, dubiously. She added: "You make the place sound quite creepy, though. Not that I believe in ghosts."

"Nor me. Perhaps if we'd actually see one . . . Anyway, this ghost was supposed to have put a curse on the house—and there may be some truth in the 'curse' bit, because two people have died here in rather tragic circumstances. One was a wealthy recluse who flung himself down an old disused well in the grounds (later it was discovered that he was a maniac who had been attacking village maidens making their way home—that was in the eighteenth century, of course), and the previous owner, the one who was here before Mr. Winchley, committed suicide."

"Yes, I heard about that. He had a big win on the pools, didn't he?"

Sonia smiled. "Yes, lucky devil—though much good did it do him. But where were we? Oh yes, so you stayed the night with Mrs. Johnson? I've never met her, but Mrs. Preston mentioned that she used to own a teashop or something in the village. She has a nephew, I believe."

"That's right. He brought me up here."

"Is he nice? All right, you don't have to answer that! You've gone quite pink . . . Well, if that's the way you feel, hang on to him. There aren't many interesting young men around here." For a moment her

lips twisted, almost bitterly, then she was smiling again.

"Come on, I'll show you to your room. Then I expect Mr. Winchley will want to see you."

She accompanied Mary up the wide staircase and along the second-floor landing. The doors of some of the rooms were open, and Mary glimpsed furniture covered in dust-sheets. There was the musty smell of damp and disuse, and as well as wallpaper peeling from the walls there were little heaps of ceiling plaster on the floors.

"The place is falling to bits," Sonia told her. "Mr. Winchley bought it cheap, redecorated three or four of the rooms, and hasn't bothered about the rest. I don't blame him. I've a feeling he doesn't intend to stay here forever, and it would cost a fortune to do the whole place up."

She led the way along a dark corridor. The air smelt even staler here, and the floorboards creaked beneath their feet. She opened a door and stood aside for Mary to enter.

"It isn't much," she said, "But I've done my best. I'll see you downstairs when you're ready. Don't be too long." She suddenly hurried away, as though she did not want to stay any longer in that gloomy corridor.

Mary stood in the doorway, glancing around the room which had been given her. But for a moment she was thinking about Sonia, and not about the room. The girl had seemed pleasant enough, yet there had been something about her Mary hadn't liked—or trusted. She couldn't place the feeling, yet it was there. Oh well, first impressions were often wrong—

Her heart sank as she surveyed the room. It was so

different from the pleasant bedroom she had occupied at the cottage. It was dull and colorless, without warmth or character, and the furniture looked as though it had been bought at a junk sale, by someone whose one thought had been to furnish the room as cheaply as possible. Not one item of furniture matched, either in style or color. There was a threadbare rug on either side of the bed, a bedside cabinet, an ancient washstand with a square piece of cardboard beneath one leg, and a wardrobe with a door that wouldn't lock properly.

The only good thing about the room was the balcony, which looked out over the sea. The French doors were open and Mary stepped out cautiously, remembering the bus conductor's warning. But if it hadn't been safe, surely the doors would have been locked?

The storm clouds were back, blotting out the early morning sunshine, and the wind had risen, fresh and salty on her face. The swelling sea looked dark and sullen and was crashing over the rocks, creaming out over the beach and the patches of sand between jagged, tooth-like rocks. Mary shivered as she gazed down and then turned back quickly into the room.

Still, she supposed it could have been a lot worse. She unpacked her case and hung her dresses in the wardrobe, trying to convince herself. After all, she was on the coast, it wouldn't always be dull and stormy—and there was Peter . . .

Her heart quickened at the thought of him and she had to admit that he had made a big impression on her. He was good-looking, and she liked the way his mouth lifted at the corners when he smiled. He

was also attentive, carrying her case for her, opening and closing the car door, assisting her out. How many young men did that today? She supposed she was a little old-fashioned, but she could still appreciate good manners in a man.

She glanced at her watch. Eleven o'clock already! What would her new employer think of her tardiness?

She hastily washed her face and hands, then changed into her neat nurse's uniform. Then she made her way along the passage and downstairs.

She heard the low murmur of voices coming from the study. The door was open and Sonia was lounging in one of the leather armchairs, her shapely legs crossed, smiling at the man who sat on the Chesterfield opposite her. A pot of coffee and three cups stood on a silver tray on the table.

They both looked towards the door as Mary entered.

"Ah, you must be Nurse James. I'm Gerald Winchley. Welcome to Seacliff House."

Mary was momentarily taken aback. For some reason she had expected to see a much older man. Gerald Winchley was in his late thirties, tall and handsome, with neatly-brushed black hair and restless brown eyes in a lean, bronzed face. They were eyes that appraised and approved, and Mary felt sure they missed nothing.

"We are so sorry you had that delay," he said. His voice was low, almost a drawl, as though he had spent some time in America. She noticed that he had excellent teeth, very white and even, but the hand that clasped her own was limp, cold and somehow

lifeless. Within seconds of meeting him, however, she realized that he had a strange magnetism.

Had he been one of the doctors at her training hospital she suspected that more than one nurse would have set her cap at him. He had nice hands, well-shaped, like a surgeon's, in spite of that peculiar limpness. She supposed it was because she was a nurse that she noticed people's hands. They were smooth and soft, the hands of a man who had never done a day's manual work in his life.

"I hope you'll enjoy your duties here, Mary—you don't mind if I call you by your Christian name?"

She smiled. "Of course not, Mr. Winchley."

"And I'd rather you called me Gerald . . . We don't want any formality here. You've met Sonia, my housekeeper, of course. Do sit down and join us. Sugar?"

"Just a little."

"Watching your figure, eh?" he teased. "Sensible girl. I'm afraid you'll find it rather quiet here after London."

"I shan't mind that, Mr. Winchley—"

"Gerald."

"Gerald." The word did not come easily to her tongue. She felt herself coloring. "I've never been a town lover."

"Nor I. Much too hectic for me, particularly since my operation."

"I hope you've been taking things quietly?"

"Oh yes, I have, I assure you."

Certainly he looked well. His skin was deeply tanned. He had recently had a nephrectomy—the left kidney had been removed—and she knew that a

sudden movement could bring a spasm of pain until the scar had healed. She noticed that he had winced slightly when he rose to greet her. There was also a heart condition, she understood, but he certainly did not give the appearance of being an invalid.

"I ride out into the bay in my launch, or stroll on the beach," he told her. "Nothing strenuous, you understand. I hope you'll accompany me sometimes."

"Of course. It's part of my job—"

"I didn't mean professionally. I meant as a . . . companion. After all, you won't have very much to do, apart from keeping an eye on me, making sure I don't exert myself too much."

"I understand you'll only be needing me for a few weeks," she said.

"Well, we'll see. Naturally, I'm not very happy about this heart business. It was something of a shock to learn about it. After all, I've always led a pretty active life and when I had these pains I simply put it down to indigestion or something."

"A lot of people do," Mary said sympathetically.

"And I'm scared stiff of hospitals," he said. "I've always been that way, ever since I was a child. You'd have thought I'd have got used to them, seeing that I was in and out of hospital with first one thing and then another—"

Again Mary was surprised. He did not give the appearance of having been a sickly child. But then again, appearances were deceptive, in the sense also that he did not look at all like a man who had not only undergone a serious operation, but suffered from heart trouble.

"Some people do fear hospitals," Mary said, "though there's really no reason why they should—" She paused, for she had the impression that he was no longer listening to her. Sonia had been silent until now, quietly smoking, and Mary had the impression that she disapproved of the warmth of his greeting for the new nurse.

Now Sonia said lazily: "I was telling Mary about the ghost, Gerald—"

"What on earth for?" His voice was sharp; he turned quickly towards her, and Mary saw him wince. "It's utter rubbish, and you know it. I'm surprised at you, Sonia. I've said before I won't have you repeating that stupid story—"

Surprisingly, the girl flushed. "Sorry." She bit her lower lip. "But when she told me about her experience last night—"

His gaze swung back to Mary. "What experience? I thought you arrived here this morning, on the first train?"

"No. I stayed the night at the cottage, with Mrs. Johnson. I caught a later train and was on my way here when—when this man began to follow me."

He stiffened. Some of the color seemed to fade from his bronzed cheeks.

"Man? What man?"

Mary told him of the incident in the barn and along the lane. "I didn't actually see anyone—only a shadow. But all the time I was running I had the feeling somebody was following me. And he was . . . laughing, a horrible, sniggering laugh." She shivered again at the recollection.

Gerald had gone quite pale and his hand crept towards his chest. Mary rose and went quickly towards him.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes, of course." He spoke impatiently. "It was just a slight twinge. Tell me more about—"

"There's nothing more to tell. In fact, I hadn't intended to tell you at all. It was probably nothing—a tramp, maybe, whom I disturbed. You mustn't worry about me; I'm perfectly all right, as you can see."

"So that's why Mrs. Johnson's nephew brought you this morning. I saw the car from my bedroom window."

Mary nodded.

"That was kind of him," he said, almost to himself. Then he suddenly, almost abruptly, changed the subject. He asked Mary questions about herself, her family; and although he seemed interested, she had the impression that his thoughts were elsewhere. Presently he excused himself, saying he thought he would lie down for a while.

"Perhaps you would see me up to my room, Mary?" he smiled. "You'll have to learn where it is, so why not now?"

"Of course, Mr.—Gerald." She accompanied him from the room and was very conscious of Sonia's eyes boring into her back. For some reason she suspected that the girl resented her presence there in the house and perhaps it was not too difficult to see why.

Was Sonia in love with her employer? It was possible. Secretaries fell in love with their bosses, why

not housekeepers? Especially when the employer was as handsome as Gerald Winchley.

It was a fleeting thought, no more, for another quickly replaced it; one that had puzzled her as soon as she had realized the effect her story had had on him. Why should he have been so agitated by the thought of a tramp wandering about in the lane below the old house?

CHAPTER 3

"It's wretched bad luck developing this heart trouble," Gerald Winchley said, with a weary smile.

"You really must stop worrying," said Mary. "It doesn't do any good, you know, and it's bad for you."

"But I do worry. That's the trouble—"

"There's no need," she said quietly. "A few months' rest and you'll be as fit as you ever were."

"It's my past life catching up with me, I suppose," he said, sinking down into a comfortable wicker chair beside the window. "It's been a hectic one. I spent it mostly abroad, you know. I was always busy, always on the go. And it was a hot climate; perhaps that didn't help."

"Oh, yes?" She paused, hoping he would elaborate, but almost as though he felt he had said too much he changed the subject.

"I haven't been in this country very long. I've been away for some years, before the Middle East it was South America, and North America. I always wanted to come home. Have you traveled, Mary?"

"Only as far as Belgium, I'm afraid," she said a trifle ruefully. "But I've always longed to."

"You could, with your job," he said. "You can always get work if you're a qualified nurse, I should imagine. You'd like America, and I understand one can command excellent fees, too."

"I might try it later," she said.

"You've no family then?"

"No. My parents were killed in an air crash five years ago."

"I'm sorry," he murmured. He looked at her again. "Any other relations?"

She shook her head. "An uncle in India, but we don't correspond."

"There must be someone." His eyes were bolder now. "All those good-looking hospital doctors . . ." His brown eyes bored into hers and she felt her color rising.

"No . . . not now."

"Then there *was* somebody?"

"Yes, but it didn't work out." Thank goodness, she thought, that she had discovered in time what Roger was really like. Yet it seemed almost a lifetime ago now.

He had been so gay and warm at first; she had been drawn to him from the first moment they had met in the Surgical Ward. He had charm too, and was very attentive. But when she had got to know him better she had realized that there was another side to his character; a mean, selfish, aggressive side. And he drank more than was good for him.

Yes, she thought, appearances could be very deceptive. One couldn't judge by first impressions.

Gerald's voice broke in upon her thoughts. "Well, someone's going to be very lucky one of these days."

"Well, I'm in no hurry to settle down yet."

"You'll change your mind. Pretty girls always do. You're very attractive, you know, Mary. You've got everything a man looks for in a woman—looks, figure, intelligence—"

There was something in his expression that made Mary change the subject, hastily.

"This is a very nice room . . ."

"Yes, *I* like it."

It was large and had obviously been recently decorated. Three walls were a pale olive green, soothing and restful; the fourth was oak-panelled on either side of the fireplace. There were two deep armchairs beside the window overlooking the sea; she could hear the waves crashing against the rocks far below. The bed was large and modern, with a padded headboard, and the fireplace had been blocked in with hardboard and painted to match the walls. There was a water color of a country scene on the chimney-piece, a pool surrounded by leafy trees, a picturesque thatched cottage in the background. A packet of cigarettes lay beside a bottle of brandy on the bedside cabinet.

"You shouldn't be smoking," she admonished as he reached for the packet.

"I know." He smiled, boyishly. "But a man must do something."

He offered her one, but she shook her head. "I mustn't set you a bad example," she said. "In any case, I smoke only seldom."

Gerald lit his cigarette and stood by the window. She saw now that there was a hint of gray in the hair just above his ears. He stood quite still, gazing out across the bay and in profile she thought that his features seemed somehow harder, less attractive. She was very conscious of him standing there.

Outside the gulls swooped and dived, screeching to each other.

"If there is an after life," he said, almost to himself, "I think I would like to be a gull."

"If there is one, it's a long way off yet," she retorted. "Still, it's a nice thought—especially on a lovely day like this. Imagine swooping and soaring above the waves, under the warm sun and the blue sky."

"You have a sensitive nature," he said, turning to look at her. "I like that. Yes, to be a gull—or any other bird, for that matter—is to be truly free."

"I don't know much about bird life, but no doubt they have their problems, too," she smiled.

"I guess you're right. Everyone, everything, has problems."

"Well, you must forget yours, if you have any," she said crisply. "Out with that cigarette and lie down for a while."

She thought she saw a flicker of annoyance cross his face for a moment, then he smiled and shrugged.

"All right, just to please you. Do I look like a man who has problems?"

"Yes." She spoke impulsively, and not quite certain what had made her say it. His eyes seemed to be mocking her and again she felt her color rising. What was there about this man which so embarrassed her?

"I haven't really," he said, shaking his immaculately-groomed head. "I know just where I'm going. I just want to travel alone." His eyes were suddenly very hard, distant and yet somehow introspective. He was, she thought, a man who had his darker side too, and she wondered if he was still thinking about the "tramp" who had followed and frightened her.

"I'll leave you now—" she began, then she stiffened,

glancing sharply towards the panelled wall beside the fireplace. Was it her imagination or had she heard a faint scratching sound?

"What is it, Mary?" She was aware of his eyes upon her. They had lost the faraway expression of a moment before and were suddenly alert and sharp.

"It's nothing," she said hurriedly. She did not want to alarm him.

"But you've gone quite pale!"

"Well, it's probably my imagination, but I thought I heard a sound over by the fireplace—a sort of scratching noise."

"Oh, that!" He looked relieved. "Just a mouse. This old place is full of them." The explanation came almost too quickly. "I'm afraid you'll have to grow accustomed to strange noises, Mary. These old houses creak and groan sometimes when the wind's blowing. You'd think the place was full of gh—spirits." She wondered why he corrected himself. "I hope you're not scared of mice."

"Oh no. But I hope there aren't any rats."

He did not answer, once more seemingly preoccupied with his thoughts, and she went out, quietly closing the door behind her. She walked briskly along the corridor and as she did so she thought she heard a faint, sniggering laugh. Her heart seemed to stop beating for a moment. She froze in her tracks, her ears intent, her whole body tensed.

But there was no sound, only the mournful cry of the gulls through the open window at the end of the corridor.

"What's the matter with me?" she asked herself fiercely. "I'm getting as jumpy as a kitten."

When she reached the hall she paused beside Mrs. Preston, who was on her hands and knees, scrubbing the stone floor.

"Have you seen Sonia, Mrs. Preston?" she asked.

"No, I haven't, and I don't care if I never do." The woman got laboriously to her feet, her round fleshy face red from her exertions. She tossed the damp floor-rag into the lukewarm pail of water and tightened her apron about her ample waist.

Mary was startled at the emphasis in her words, but hid her surprise. "Why don't you use a mop?" she asked. "It wouldn't be so hard on your knees."

"Why don't you tell her ladyship that!"

"Who?"

"Sonia," puffed the woman. "Because I accidentally broke the mop she's docking me a couple of bob a week until it can be replaced."

"Oh!"

"You can say that again," Mrs. Preston remarked grimly. "Proper skinflint, that one, for all she doesn't mind dipping her fingers into the housekeeping for her own use." She straightened her shoulders. "Well, that's me lot for half-an-hour. Come and meet cook. We always have a cup of coffee about now; even *she* can't begrudge us that."

She led the way along a maze of corridors at the back of the house and presently entered a large, well-lit room overlooking the rear. A tall, thin-faced woman wearing a white overall was standing beside the stove. She had silver-white hair and a sharply-pointed nose.

"This is Mary, the new nurse, Ada," Mrs. Preston said. "Make yourself at home, love." She pointed to a chair drawn up to the table.

Ada Lathom's walnut-like face wrinkled in a welcoming smile.

She held out a thin hand and peered at Mary over the top of her gold-rimmed spectacles.

"With or without?" she asked in a dry, husky voice.

"With, please."

She placed the cups on a tray and brought them over to the table. In repose her expression was severe. Ada Lathom had been a cook for as long as she could remember, and a first-class one at that. In the "good old days" as she called them, she had catered for house parties large in number, and had never turned a hair. She had been praised by the "gentry" and could have retired tomorrow on the proceeds of the three properties she owned on the coast; for she had always been a thrifty woman and had had more than her share of tips at the Hunt Balls. But she preferred to continue working, even if the big parties and the gentry were, as she knew them, a thing of the past.

She decided that Mary seemed a nice girl, not like that other one . . .

"How is he today?" she asked.

"Better than I expected to find him."

"I think so, too," said Mrs. Preston. "Looked real poorly when he first came here, but now—"

"—gets stronger every day," put in Ada.

"It's your cooking that's doing it, Ada," said Mrs. Preston, smiling affectionately. "My Fred loved that slice of gooseberry pie you sent him. He says mine always give him the colic—"

"More likely it's that strong ale he drinks at The

Feathers. You really ought to try to stop him, Lucy. He drinks far too much of the stuff."

"I know. I'm always telling him that, but he takes no notice of me. It's what he's been used to and nothing will change him now. It's giving him a real gut, if you'll pardon the expression in your kitchen, Ada. Have you got a man, Mary?"

"No."

"Nor's she—" Ada jerked her head towards the ceiling. She wore her hair brushed close to her skull and tied in a "bun" at the back. It made her look more severe than she would normally have done. "But she means to alter that."

"Are you talking about Sonia?" Mary's eyes were amused. "Does she have somebody in the village?"

"No. She's after Mr. Gerald."

"Well, you can't blame her," said Mrs. Preston. "He must be a pretty good catch, owning a place like this."

Ada sniffed. "He might and he might not. Too much mystery attached to him if you ask me. Still, that's his affair. You can see what *she's* after, a mile away. Wiggling and wobbling around in front of him in those mini-dresses. Disgusting, I call it."

"I've met her type before," put in Mrs. Preston. "Out for all they can get, somewhere to hang up their hat. It beats me, though, why he needs a housekeeper just to look after a few rooms—"

"Housekeeper!" Ada sniffed. "She may call herself that, but she's no more idea than the man in the moon. She thinks she knows it all, but she doesn't. Anyone who has been with the gentry as long as I

have knows that she's never done anything like this before."

Mrs. Preston nodded sourly. "I know. I've worked on some big estates myself in my time. You're quite right, Ada. Bit of a mystery herself, if you ask me. My Fred says she's looking for an easy billet."

Ada stirred her coffee vigorously.

"Her kind's what we used to call 'common' in the old days, the kind the young gentry used to amuse themselves with when they went up to London for a weekend, if you know what I mean."

"I do." Mrs. Preston agreed with most of what the sharp-featured cook said, and was secretly rather flattered to be her confidante.

Mary said: "How long has Sonia been here?"

"She came a day or two before me," Ada explained, sipping her coffee. "Said she answered an advertisement in a London newspaper. Shows Mr. Gerald hasn't had much experience of taking on staff. Anyone accustomed to it wouldn't have given her a second look."

"A lot of men would find her attractive," Mary said.

"That's just it, I suppose." Ada sniffed again. "Anyway, Mary, you take my tip and be on your guard against that one. You're much too pretty to suit her ladyship, you mark my words."

"Yes, you watch her," concurred Mrs. Preston. "She's two-faced. The other nurse left because she poisoned his mind against her. She tell you it was the ghost. Ghost, indeed! I've never seen it—though mind you, there *is* something . . . Sometimes I've a feeling as if something cold was walking right through me."

"You mean walking over your grave, don't you, Lucy?"

"I know what I mean," said Mrs. Preston severely. "Just watch out for her, and her tittle-tattling—"

"And for Rubber Lips—"

"*Who?*" asked Mary, in surprise.

"Mr. Gerald's assistant," said the cook.

"I didn't know he had an assistant."

"Looks like something stepped out of one of these horror films," nodded Mrs. Preston. "Ugly as sin, with horrible thick lips."

"Wouldn't trust him as far as I could see him," said Ada Lathom. "He's got wandering eyes. Sleeps in the room next to Mr. Gerald, but he's away at the moment—on business in London, I believe. Not that he has much to say for himself, though I gather he's worked for Mr. Gerald for a long time." She glanced at the clock. "Well, this won't do. I've work to do, if you haven't. Please look in any time, Mary."

Mary felt herself dismissed. She smiled at them and went out of the kitchen, but her expression was thoughtful as she walked back along the corridor. Mrs. Preston and Ada Lathom between them had given her quite a lot to think about.

CHAPTER 4

When the door had closed behind Mary, Gerald Winchley lay back on the bed and drew the pink silk bedspread up about his shoulders.

She was pretty, he reflected, much prettier than his previous nurse had been, and that was saying something. She looked cute in that uniform. Did she have short black hair, or was it pinned up under that little cap? She would look adorable in a mini-dress. The loose-fitting blue uniform could not conceal that she had a beautiful figure.

"As soon as she's settled in I'll tell her that I prefer my nurse to wear a dress," he mused. "I'll say uniforms remind me too much of hospitals."

He hated hospitals. The smell of ether, the gleaming instruments in the porcelain trays on the glass trolleys, frightened him. He had dreaded the daily sight of the doctors and surgeons, the nurses with their hypodermic syringes. And the way some of the patients were trussed up, or smothered in bandages like Egyptian mummies, had made his sensitive stomach heave.

He gazed at the chimney breast. Something was scratching again. Mice, he had told Mary, but he wondered why he had never noticed it before.

He lay back on his pillow, pretending to be asleep, watching through half-closed eyes. His heart was

beginning to pound, but not painfully, and a vein throbbed in his throat.

For several minutes nothing happened. The scratching had ceased. There was complete silence save for the waves crashing against the rocks below the open window. A gentle breeze stirred the curtains, was cool on his face.

Then, almost without sound, the wooden panel beside the chimney breast slid aside and a man stepped into the room. He seemed startled to see Gerald lying there on the bed. A gun sprang into his hand and he cat-footed forward.

He was slightly built, with a thin, sallow face, a pointed nose and a small, spiteful mouth. There was dust on his pale-blue, double-breasted jacket and on the knees of his trousers. His hair was long, untidy, greasy, and hung down to his shoulders.

Three yards from the bed he paused and studied the man lying there, his closely-set eyes screwed up in the dark-rimmed sockets, a puzzled expression on his weak face. Then a wide grin creased his foxy features and he crept forward another yard.

"Not bad," he muttered softly. "Not bad—but it don't fool me."

It was then Gerald opened his eyes and fixed him with a cold stare.

"Hello, Weasel," he said.

The little man gasped and took a step back. The gun jerked up in his bony fist. His knuckles showed white. He gave a sniggering little laugh.

"Didn't expect to see me again, eh, Gerry?" He grinned, revealing yellow, discolored teeth.

"I thought you'd show up sometime," Winchley

said casually. The pain in his chest was less severe now; now that the expected trouble had materialized the tension had gone. He was calm, perfectly relaxed. With anyone else he might have felt different, even afraid. But not with this man. He had nothing to fear from him, only from the men behind him.

Weasel said: "You've lost weight."

"I've been ill."

"They said you had."

Winchley looked at him sharply. "They?"

"The folk in the village. You've got a nurse, I hear." He snickered. "A pretty one, too."

"You should know. You've seen her. It was you, wasn't it?"

Weasel gave a tittering laugh. "She told you, did she? Yes, it was me. I couldn't see her, but I could smell her. I thought I was dreaming, honest I did, Gerry. There was me in the hay, dreaming—Oh, a lovely dream it was! Then it started to rain and I woke up. Then I smelt her—the perfume. I just couldn't believe it at first, thought it was still part of the dream, see. Then I saw her standing there, in the doorway—"

Winchley said coldly. "It was your laugh that gave you away. She heard you. You always did snigger, Weasel. Remember that big fat blonde in Cairo?"

"Yeah, I'll say I do—" Then he stopped. "Why did you do it? Why?"

"Why?"

"Yes, you know what I mean. Why? It's not like you."

"Impulse," said Winchley. "Put it down to impulse."

"It's going to cost you plenty."

"I'm not worried."

Weasel frowned. "You're not worried?"

"No. I'm dying, you know."

"Now pull the other one . . ." the man jeered.

"It's true. I had a heart attack in Boston. No one knew. That's why I got out. It's not the first. I thought I could fight it, but I couldn't. The attacks are more frequent now—"

"You'll have me in tears in a minute."

"It's true. Why do you think I've engaged a nurse?"

"Okay, have it your way. It makes no difference. No difference at all. You'll see."

"I'm not scared. I'm not afraid to die. So I'm not afraid of you."

"It's not me you have to be afraid of."

"The others are here?" Winchley's voice was casual, too casual.

"They will be, tomorrow. I sent them a wire. Soon as I saw Max—I knew if he was here you wouldn't be far away. I figured you was here for the day. You know, day trippers. Funny this place should stick in my mind. The name, I suppose. And you saying once that it was one of the most beautiful spots you'd ever been to."

"You've got a good memory, Weasel. But then, you always did have."

"So I followed him and saw him go into this cave . . ." He sniggered again, "And so here I am."

"Where's Max now? Where the hell is he, that he should let this happen?"

"Sleeping. Knowing Max, I didn't give him a chance

to see me. I just hit him very hard." He gestured with the heavy Luger. "Interesting dump, this. I've read about these old places that have secret passages up from the beach, but I thought it was all fairy-tale stuff."

Winchley smiled faintly. "You'll find a lot of them up and down the coast. These old houses were the hide-out of smugglers in the olden days."

"You smuggling now? What's all that stuff down in the cave?"

Winchley shrugged. "You surely don't expect me to tell you?"

"There's ways and means." The Weasel's face split into an ugly smile.

Winchley laughed. "In my condition? I've told you, I don't care. You don't worry me. Shall I tell you something? You've had all your trouble for nothing. All right, I'm here. Kabri doesn't like what I did, and what happened to Rita . . . So what?"

"Tell that to Kabri; he can be real mean. He's spent a lot of dough trying to find you."

Winchley eyed him steadily. "You don't have to tell him that you've found me."

The Weasel's expression was wary now. He knew Gerald of old. He was a smooth, persuasive talker—the gift of the gab, Kabri had always called it.

"You're joking," he said.

"Disappear."

"That wouldn't be easy."

Winchley lit a cigarette. He stared at the cunning little man, his eyes screwed up against the rising smile.

"Do the others know precisely where I am?"

"You'll find out soon enough. But keep talking . . ."

"I'll pay you to forget all about me," Winchley said. "I can afford to. All I want is peace and quiet. I'm sorry about Rita, but it was one of those things. And it's nothing to do with you, anyway. Why should you care if Kabri is mad at me?"

Greed flickered in the Weasel's eyes. "What had you in mind, then?"

"I haven't given it much thought. Obviously I wasn't expecting to see you. But for a start I would give you enough to buy yourself a little business abroad. In France, or Italy. Or maybe you would prefer Spain —the cost of living is cheaper out there. You'd have nothing to do but laze, and Kabri would never find you."

The little man moistened his lips. He was a lazy man; the very mention of hard work invariably brought on those pains in his stomach. Why not accept? He had nothing to thank Kabri for. He treated him like dirt, and queried every penny of his expenses. This seemed like the offer of a lifetime. To get away from it all, the mean streets, the weather—why, he could even get away from Maggie!

He brightened. He thought of golden sands and dolly birds and money jingling in his pockets. It would be like living on a generous pension—

"Well?"

"I'll have to think it over," he muttered.

"Well, don't take too long, and if Kabri is on his way down here, make sure he doesn't see you. Otherwise it's off."

"Don't worry about me." Weasel moved back towards the panel in the wall. "I'll be back tonight, okay?"

"That'll do fine. You'll find me here any time after nine. Doctor's orders and—Quick, get out! There's someone coming along the corridor."

When Sonia came in a moment later she stared about her with a puzzled expression on her hard, beautiful face.

"You're alone?"

"What does it look like?" he grinned. He was in a good mood. Tonight the Weasel would talk; Max would see to that.

"I could have sworn you were talking to someone—"

"You were dreaming. You can see for yourself there's no one here."

Sonia's face cleared and she smiled.

"It must be this old house." She had expected to find Mary there, and realized she had been mistaken. Well, perhaps she wasn't his type, after all. The warmth of his greeting, his attentiveness, was just Gerry being Gerry. He couldn't resist "putting himself across" where women were concerned.

She said, "How are you feeling now?"

"Better, but I thought I'd have an hour's rest."

"It will do you good. Nothing like a rest. How do you like the new nurse?"

"Mary?"

"Who else?"

He smiled. "She seems very . . . capable."

"And pretty."

"Yes, I suppose she is now you come to mention it."

She came closer, bent to tuck in the silken coverlet. The perfume she used wafted to his nostrils. His arm slipped about her waist.

"You're not jealous, are you?"

"I've no reason to be, have I?" she asked lightly.

"No."

She stared down into his eyes. "I hope you mean that, Gerald." She nibbled at his ear.

"Of course I do," he protested, and his arm tightened around her waist. "I fell for you the moment I saw you in that club, Sonia. Honestly, there's no one else. Sure, she's pretty, but so was the other one. She means nothing to me."

He reached up and drew her down to him. His lips crushed against the warm softness of her mouth.

"I hope you mean that, Gerry," she said huskily. "I feel the same way about you. I'd kill anyone who came between us. I swear it!"

Well, the first day was over, and it hadn't been too bad, Mary thought as she sank down wearily upon the bed in her room. Ada Lathom and Mrs. Preston were friendly enough, and she thought she could cope with Sonia. Gerald had risen after lunch and seemed in a good humor. His conversation was lively and intelligent as they relaxed in the lounge that afternoon, although she suspected that his beautiful housekeeper resented her presence there, particularly when he suggested that he and Mary take a stroll together on the beach the following morning.

That Sonia was attracted to him she now had no

doubt. It was apparent from the way she looked at him—and those tight, revealing dresses were worn deliberately to keep him interested.

It was only to be expected, she supposed; an attractive girl and a good-looking man, thrown together for most of the time in this strange old house. As for her own feelings about Gerald Winchley, she knew there was no danger that she would fall in love with him. He was handsome, there was no question of that, and she liked the way he smiled and his courteous manner towards her—yet there was something about him that she didn't quite like, even though she couldn't put a finger on it.

Perhaps it was the way he looked at her sometimes—on one particular occasion especially. She had turned suddenly, conscious of his gaze upon her, and there had been something in his eyes . . . an expression she could not identify, yet which caused a little shiver to run down her spine.

How silly she was! She was too imaginative, that was the trouble. And if he had any thoughts in her direction, then he was most assuredly wasting his time.

She undressed, rinsed her stockings in the washbowl in the corner and hung them on the little line she had rigged up on the balcony, which Sonia had reassured her was perfectly safe. She wondered what Peter was doing. She had felt a little disappointed that he had not telephoned her that evening to enquire how she was settling into her new job.

Oh well, perhaps he hadn't liked to disturb her on her first day.

Now, Peter was different. She really was attracted

to him. He was not as good-looking as Gerald —whereas her new employer was undeniably handsome, Peter had a rugged attractiveness—but he had a cheerful smile and a clear-eyed, admiring glance that made her pulse quicken. Gerald, on the other hand . . . You couldn't read what was in his mind, what went on behind those dark eyes. And he was obviously a "charmer" where women were concerned.

She would have to watch him. In any case, she was anxious not to arouse any friction between herself and Sonia.

Stifling a yawn, she switched out the light and crossed to the window. Outside it was a bright, moonlit night, and the sea was bathed in molten silver. There was a cool, salty breeze on her face as she stepped out onto the balcony, and from far below came the deep thunder of the waves creaming amongst the ugly-toothed rocks.

What a wonderful view after that from her room in London, with the gray, wet rooftops and the smell of cooking floating up from the kitchen of the restaurant next door.

This was grand!

She stood there, breathing in appreciatively. It looked as though another storm was on the way. Dark clouds were filling the sky, and even as she watched they blotted out the silver radiance of the moon. She felt a spot of rain on her cheeks and with a little shrug she closed the French windows and climbed into bed.

She lay there staring up at the dark ceiling. She was tired but she found it difficult to sleep, probably because it was a strange bed—a bed which, incidentally, was not as comfortable as it had looked. The

moon floated from behind the clouds and thrust yellow beams of light across the room then disappeared again, leaving it darker than before.

She must have fallen asleep for she awoke suddenly to hear the crackle of thunder overhead. Rain was lashing against the windows, which were beginning in the wind. She sat up with a start—that was strange, for she could have sworn she had shut them firmly before getting into bed.

They kept banging open and the wind was filling the curtains so that they flapped damply in the darkness. She would have to get out and close them.

She could not have shut them firmly, she supposed, as she slid from the bed and padded across the room. The linoleum was cold to her feet and, shivering, she refastened the French doors, shutting out the sound of the wind and the waves thundering below.

She would have to examine the catch next morning, and if it was loose she would get Gerald to fix it.

She scrambled back into bed and lay there, still shivering. It was very much colder now than when she had first gone to bed. She struck a match and glanced at her watch.

It was almost three o'clock. She dropped the spent match in the ashtray beside her bed and closed her eyes. If she didn't get some sleep she would be a sight in the morning. The wind had risen to a fury and was moaning about the gray stone walls. Something crashed down on the balcony—a loose slate, she supposed. Lightning sizzled across the sky, and was quickly followed by the deep, grumbling rumble of thunder.

What a change in the weather, she thought. It had

been wonderfully warm and sunny the previous afternoon, when they had sat out on the terrace and had their tea there. Now look at it!

She lay back on her pillow and tried to sleep. Once she thought she heard what seemed like a sobbing cry, and she lay rigid in bed; but it didn't come again. It must have been the wind.

Really, she must try to compose herself. She had never known her nerves to get the better of her before. It was the old house, she supposed, the strangeness of it all; the unfamiliar bed, the storm. It was bound to be noisy and violent on the coast, after all, and she must surely realize that. Especially when the house was perched high on a pinnacle of rock astride the cliff tops like some ancient sentinel that had become fossilized through the centuries.

It was then she heard the sobbing scream again.

This time there was no doubt about it. With a gasp she reached out for the bedside lamp, switched it on and sprang out of bed.

Hastily she scrambled into her dressing-gown. She was trembling as she opened the door.

The passage was in darkness, but as she stepped outside, tying the cord of the gown about her waist, the lights suddenly came on. In the same instant a man came into view, a giant of a man with stooped shoulders and long, gangling arms.

At the sight of her he stopped.

CHAPTER 5

Mary swallowed nervously. Her heart was pounding against her ribs and her mouth felt dry. She moistened her lips with her tongue.

"Who . . . who are you?"

"Me, Miss?" He had a deep, throaty voice. "Oh, of course, you wouldn't know, would you? I'm Max, Mr. Winchley's assistant. I'm sorry if I frightened you."

"Oh." Some of the tension oozed out of her. "Is . . . is anything the matter?"

"Matter, Miss?"

"I thought I heard a scream—"

"I didn't hear anything," he said, after a moment's pause.

"But I'm sure—"

"You must be mistaken, Miss. It was probably the wind. These old houses make some queer noises especially when there's a storm blowing, like there is now."

She stared at him and wondered if he was lying. He must be. Not even the wind, pitched in all its fury against the old cliff house, could have sounded so much like a human being crying out in despair or pain. She had heard that sound too often—it had reminded her of one of her patients. And yet . . .

She eyed him nervously. He was a big man with a barrel-like chest, beady eyes and thick, rubbery lips.

She recalled Ada's description. Rubber Lips. Of course, she hadn't taken much notice at the time, but she had said that his name was Max.

He had enormously hunched shoulders and long arms. The thick lips were drawn back over large, very white teeth in a grimace or a smile, meant to reassure her but only succeeding in frightening her. He reminded her of a man dressed as an ape, which she had once seen in a jungle film.

Max's smile was, in fact, one of amusement. He was well aware of his frightening appearance and he had played on it from an early age. In his youth he had terrorized other boys and small children; later he had enrolled with the Mercenaries and struck fear into the hearts of his enemies.

"I should go back to bed, Miss," he growled. "You'll catch your death of cold." He gave her that wide, unpleasant grin again.

"Well . . ." she said doubtfully, "if you're sure there's nothing wrong."

"Nothing, Miss, and if you're worrying about Mr. Winchley you can forget it. I've just been in to see him and he's perfectly all right."

"You spoke to him?"

"Yes."

"Very well. Good night."

Unhappily she turned back into her room and closed the door. Was Max lying, or had she been mistaken?

She wouldn't get the chance to find out now, because if something was wrong, the big man would be watching out for her.

It *must* be her imagination. She was jumpy—and who wouldn't be in an old house like this, balanced

on the cliff top? It was a wonder it hadn't been swept into the sea long before this. Heavens! What was she thinking!

She curled up in bed and tried to draw the bedclothes over her head, tried to shut out the violent sound of the storm.

The following morning was bright, sunny and warm, with a cloudless blue sky, and the storm might never have been. The sea was like a mill-pond, creaming against the golden beach, trickling among the green weed-covered rocks.

"You were right, Miss," Max had told her after breakfast when she met him in the hall. "About that scream, I mean. It was a gull. It was lying on the roof—the wind had flung it against the lightning conductor and it had broken one of its wings."

"Oh, the poor thing! Can I do anything for it?"

"The vet collected it this morning, Miss, early. I telephoned as soon as I found it."

So he did have a kind heart, in spite of his unprepossessing appearance, Mary thought. It just went to prove, once again, that one shouldn't judge people too hastily. He didn't seem at all the terrifying figure he had seemed last night—at least, not quite so frightening. But he was still awesome; a giant of a man, well over six feet six inches and looking as strong as an ox.

"An ugly fellow, my Max," smiled Gerald as she strolled at his side along the beach. "I hope he didn't give you too much of a scare last night."

"Well, it was rather a shock, coming upon him in the corridor," she admitted.

"I blame myself entirely. I should have told you I had an assistant, and warned you that he was somewhat . . . forbidding. Poor Max. He's a gentle soul, really. Did he tell you about the sea gull?"

She nodded.

"You should have seen him when he found it. I'll swear the poor fellow almost shed tears over it. He brought it straight up to his room and rang down for some hot milk before phoning for the vet. A gentle person, indeed. He likes it here, too. He's been away on business for me, that's why I was unable to introduce you yesterday."

He strode along beside her, deeply bronzed and handsome, the wind tugging gently at the cravate around his neck. He wore a blue shirt over beach trunks and his strong legs were darkly tanned.

"It's most thoughtless of me," he said, with a sideways glance at her, "I should have told you to bring your beachwear. You must be dreadfully warm in that uniform."

"A little," she confessed.

"I think it would be a good idea if you discarded the uniform from now on." She looked a little startled, and he chuckled. "I phrased that rather badly, I'm afraid . . . what I meant was that as far as I am concerned you can wear a dress or something. I hate uniforms, anyway, they remind me too much of hospital—"

"That's very kind of you—as long as Dr. Framling doesn't object. I'll mention it to him when he calls."

"Framling. Oh, I'm sure he won't mind. He's a good doctor, isn't he?"

"Very good," she said.

"I'm grateful to him for sending me such a pretty nurse," Gerald murmured, his eyes teasing.

"You're obviously getting better, Mr. Winchley," she said sternly.

"I'm sure of it, Mary. The moment you arrived I said to myself 'What has this nurse got that the previous one hadn't?' "

She colored. "I'm quite sure you're imagining it," she said. "I mean, that my arrival has been responsible for any sudden improvement in your health. It's a natural progression. You're bound to be getting stronger and better with every passing day, as far as your nephrectomy operation is concerned, and providing you don't overdo things, your heart condition too."

"I can see I have annoyed my nurse," he said softly, a sad note in his voice.

"Of course you haven't—"

"I can see from the look in your eyes. You object to my flirting with you . . ."

"Nurses are accustomed to it," she said, with a faint smile. "It's a sure sign that the patient is well on the way to recovery."

"I see."

"There *is* one thing." She paused and turned towards him.

"What's that?" He felt his pulse quicken as he gazed down at her. He thought how lovely she was with her small, shapely mouth and large brown eyes, the breeze gently whispering against a tendril of black silky hair which had escaped from beneath her cap.

She hesitated and he reached out to close his hand upon her arm.

"Well?"

"You seem to be living under some kind of tension, and that isn't good for you."

His amused expression changed to one of surprise, perhaps chagrin. Wariness flickered in his eyes.

"I told you, you had something the other nurse lacked," he said. "Perception . . ."

"Then it's true?"

He shrugged. "I don't suppose I have any more inner tension that the majority of businessmen."

"You should try to forget your business worries for the time being," she said. "Your blood pressure was up this morning. Did you have a bad night?"

"Sometimes I can't sleep. Last night was no worse than any other, I suppose. The storm did aggravate it a little."

"You should have let me know—sent Max for me. I could have given you something to help you sleep."

"Nonsense, there was really no need," he said. "And stop worrying about me. I don't believe in working too hard." His mouth tightened for a moment; his face looked very hard, almost cruel. "I worked hard as a youngster. I was working when other fellows of my age were dancing, or with girls, or spending Saturday afternoons watching football. I never had it easy and when you're ambitious you make enemies. They have long memories, too. Sometimes you have to do things you—you don't particularly like doing, but there's no alternative. People scheme, you have to get in first . . . But don't let's talk about me. Let's talk about *you*."

His hand tightened on her wrist, drawing her

closer, then slipped about her waist. His mouth crushed down on hers. For a moment she relaxed against him, startled by the suddenness of his embrace, then she broke free, her face flaming.

"Please . . . You mustn't!"

His lips parted to say something, but the words never came. She realized that he was staring over her shoulder. His mouth was set and tight, as it had been a few moments before. The attractive smile was gone.

He turned. "Come on, we must get back to the house," he said abruptly.

She wondered what had so suddenly changed his mood. There was nothing, no one in sight, only a motor launch speeding across the bay. Puzzled, forgetting to be angry, she followed him up the narrow path which wound up among the rocks to the gray stone house looming above them on the cliff-top.

He made no attempt to apologize for his behavior on the beach, and immediately they entered the hall he nodded to her and said:

"I'll see you later. There's something I've remembered I must do."

He was breathing heavily and his face was flushed. She was immediately concerned for him.

"You shouldn't have hurried like that! It would make any normal person breathless, but in your state of health—You'd better lie down."

"I'll be all right," he said irritably. "Stop fussing. I know best." It was first time he had displayed a flash of temper towards her.

"I don't think you do," she said quietly. "I've been engaged as your nurse and as long as you continue to employ me in that capacity you must do as I tell

you. Now please go and lie down. I'll come and see you later."

In the privacy of her own room a few minutes later she stood against the window, looking out over the bay. The single occupant of the motor launch had cut the engine and the launch was rising and falling gently on the sea.

She thought she caught the flash of binoculars as though someone were watching her, or watching the house, but she couldn't be sure. She turned away and when she next looked the man appeared to be sitting there, reading a paper.

Odd. Was it the motor launch that had made Gerald so abruptly decide to leave the beach? Certainly he had been staring over her shoulder at something. On the other hand, it could have been something he had seen among the rocks.

Had someone been watching them?

Sonia?

Mary colored at the memory of that kiss on the beach. She had been half-prepared for it from the way he had spoken. Nor was it anything new. Experience had taught her how to deal with such a situation, but she hadn't reacted quite as quickly as usual.

Had she had some subconsicous wish to be kissed by him? Was that it? He *was* handsome and charming—

She turned away from the window. Good grief, what *was* the matter with her? She had met other men having the same magnetism as Gerald, but she hadn't allowed them to kiss her. So why . . . ? He took me by surprise, she told herself angrily, and if he

hadn't been my patient, I would have slapped his face.

Although she had not known him for long she had already realized that he was a strange man in many ways. A man of sudden changes of mood; kind and considerate one moment, cold and abrupt the next. There could even be a cruel streak in him perhaps, she thought, remembering the way his mouth had tightened on occasions. That he had worked hard during his life she had no doubt.

But surely now he could afford to relax and take a less active interest in his business? He should, anyway, because tension was still there. And that could kill him. But could a man who had worked long and arduously all his life suddenly put the brakes on? Perhaps he should—but could he?

She thought that he tried. He liked pop music; a powerful radio had played background music that afternoon while they had had tea on the terrace. And he read a great deal, too, if the contents of the bookcase in the lounge were anything to go by. Thrillers and crime novels mostly. He had a parcel of the latest novels sent to him every month, so he had told her.

She wandered back to the window, saw that the lone occupant of the motor launch had restarted the engine and was heading away across the way towards the headland. Presently the launch disappeared from sight and she stepped cautiously onto the balcony.

A new thought struck her. It may have been Peter! But if so, why hadn't he waved?

She stared down at the floor of the balcony. Yes,

it had been a slate that had crashed down during the storm; it had shattered into several jagged fragments and she pushed it into a corner with the edge of her shoe. She examined the balcony with its heavy stone balustrade and ornate stonework; much of it was green with age and was crumbling away. It might be wiser not to use it often, she thought. Feeling a little queasy in the pit of her stomach, as she glanced down at the jagged rocks below, she turned and went back into her room.

Remembering Gerald's suggestion that she need not wear her uniform, she was tempted to change, but decided against it. Dr. Framling might not approve, so she decided to wait until he had called.

She spent the remainder of the day reading or wandering about the weed-covered terrace at the back of the house. The burly Max had told her that Gerald was lying down resting and did not want to be disturbed. Sonia apparently had gone to the village in the car, so she had the place to herself. At four o'clock she had tea with Miss Lathom and it was soon afterwards that Peter telephoned.

Her heart quickened as she recognized his voice. He asked her how she was settling into her new job.

"Fine."

"No accidents?"

"Why should there be?"

"The storm," he said. "Slates off roofs, TV aerials coming down; that's what's been happening in the village. And the winds ripped the roofing off Aunt Freda's chalet."

"I *am* sorry—"

"I'll soon fix it," he said cheerfully. "Think you

can make tonight? I thought I might show you the harbor."

"I'd love that, but I'm not quite sure . . . Gerald's lying down at the moment."

"Gerald . . . already?"

She felt flustered. Color burned her cheeks.

"He insisted -and after all, he is my employer." Then, smiling: "All right, it's a date. If I can't make it I'll telephone you at the cottage."

"Right. Start walking down just after seven and I'll come to meet you. I should have finished work on the chalet then . . ."

He rang off, and Mary replaced the receiver slowly in its cradle. She wondered where he had telephoned from; she was certain she had heard the sound of soft background music and a woman's laugh—not Aunt Freda's.

Oh well, it was nothing to do with her how Peter spent his afternoons, was it? He was just a good friend, nothing more.

But for some unknown reason she felt quite depressed for the remainder of the afternoon.

CHAPTER 6

When Sonia came back from the village she was hot, and in a foul temper. She had stormed out of the house earlier that morning and the drinks she had had in the quaint oak-beamed little pub opposite the tiny harbor had not improved her mood.

When she had first met Gerald in that intimate little bar in London, she had been attracted to the tall, handsome man who told her he had recently returned from the Middle East. When she had realized that he was wealthy, and had mentioned casually that he was looking for a housekeeper, she had realized that here was a heaven-sent opportunity to leave the West End with its many unpleasant associations. And, in particular, Big Ben, whom she realized was growing tired of her and making it all too obvious. There had been ugly, violent scenes, particularly when that sloe-eyed half-caste girl had come upon the scene.

Gerald had invited her to dinner that evening and she had taken care over her make-up; her perfume was exotic, seductive, her mini-dress figure-hugging, and when they danced close in the dimly-lit intimacy of a club she murmured: "You tempt me to apply for the job as your housekeeper. After all, I did take a course in domestic science."

"It's yours, if you want it." He had gazed down into her eyes, spoken softly. "But it's a gloomy old house,

reputed to be haunted, and in a desolate spot. Won't you miss the *Dolce Vita* life?"

"No, I'll be glad to get away." And that was true.

Besides, in a lonely, isolated place such as he had mentioned, they would be flung closer together. He was convalescing after an operation, he told her. Better still, she could be attentive, loving, when they were alone together; there were so many ways in which she could endear herself to him, make herself indispensable.

She was a girl who had always known what she wanted. In her childhood she had sat in her shabby bedroom with its cracked ceiling, eating toast and dripping, avidly reading the glossy magazines which she had bought from the second-hand bookstall in the market.

They were full of lovely photographs of elegant ladies at Ascot, posing outside the pillared porch of Lord Whosit's country house, having cocktails at smart county clubs or week-end parties at Cannes. How she had envied them! For her it had been an escape from her drab surroundings, and she had told herself that one day that was how she would live; she would marry well.

But she had learned that life doesn't always turn out as one plans—far from it—yet now there was a chance to realize her dreams. Gerald had stirred her senses the moment she saw him, and he had plainly been interested in her. His eyes had brightened, had glowed over her appreciatively, and he had been a gay, interesting companion. She had since realized she was falling in love with him. Not only was he attractive but he had personality; a mag-

netism that was difficult to resist, as Mary herself had discovered.

Sonia had made sure, from the start, that there would be no competition in the shape of attractive maids, but she had overlooked competent, pretty nurses provided by agencies and doctors, who did not come under her jurisdiction. When Mary had arrived in the company of Mrs. Johnson's nephew, she had believed there was nothing to fear.

Now she wasn't so sure.

Gerald was sitting at his desk in the study when she went in. He had been frowning over a typewritten paper he had been reading, but at her appearance he hastily folded it and put it in his pocket. That was something she had learned about him—he was very secretive. He was vague about his business, and the source of his income.

"Don't let's talk about business," he would say. "It's a drag."

He was always reading papers and documents which he never left lying about, but kept locked in the safe he had had installed behind the Monet painting in his bedroom.

Now he smiled a greeting. He looked very handsome and relaxed in fawn slacks, a powder-blue shirt and a colourful bow tie.

"You were driving like a maniac this morning," he said.

"Was I?"

"I watched you from my bedroom window. That coast road is dangerous. You could easily go into a skid and go hurtling over the cliff."

"You're worried in case I smash up the car?"

"Cars can be replaced but not beautiful women," he said.

"You don't really care about me," she said petulantly.

He looked surprised. "What makes you say that? It's nonsense, of course. You know I do. You mean a lot to me, Sonia."

"I find that difficult to believe."

He raised his eyebrows questioningly. "What do you mean by that?"

"You know what I mean!" she snapped. "I saw you on the beach with Mary."

"Oh, that," he said casually.

"Yes, that!" she snapped.

"It doesn't mean anything."

"I saw the way you were looking at her. It meant a great deal if I know anything about you."

"You were spying on us?"

She flushed.

"Of course I wasn't, Gerry." She lit a cigarette with quick, jerky movements. "You know me better than that. I—I just happened to be taking a stroll. I woke up with an appalling headache this morning. I had had some coffee but that didn't seem to make any difference, so I thought some air in my lungs would do me good."

"You'll have another headache if you carry on like this."

"I've got on," she said irritably. "I heard the things you were saying to her. The old routine . . . There's nothing new in it, I've heard it a dozen times from men I've known."

He got to his feet. "My dear Sonia—" he murmured, reaching for her hand.

"Don't touch me!" She turned her back.

"Darling, don't be like that." His hand went out again, slid around her waist, drawing her to him. "Life's too short to quarrel."

She tried to resist him but he only tightened his hold and gazed down at her, his eyes teasing. She wanted to escape from his embrace, and yet she couldn't, such was the power he had over her. There was something about him that she couldn't fight. What was it? Charm, love? He could twist her around his little finger and she knew it. Once his arms were about her, holding her close, she knew she was beaten.

She closed her eyes. She was breathing quickly and his lips were brushing her eyes, the tip of her nose, were warm on her mouth.

"Don't, Gerry," she said huskily. "It's not fair. You always get round me like this."

"Because I don't like to see a beautiful girl upsetting herself, that's why. And you are upset. And you've no reason to be. Mary means nothing to me. She was there, she was pretty, and I wanted to kiss her. That's all. I'm certainly not in love with her. Sonia . . ." He held her at arm's length, and now he was smiling again, "You should have seen the expression on her face! She was quite shocked. Such innocence—"

"That's what attracts you."

"What do you mean?"

"Her innocence."

"Don't be silly, Sonia. How long is it since we two

have known each other? Three months, perhaps longer. We've come to understand each other a great deal. We know that we're good for each other. We knew that the first day we met, didn't we?"

"Y-yes," she agreed, unsteadily.

"Well then, enough of this nonsense," he said sternly. "I can hear someone coming—probably cook—and we don't want to give her any excuse to gossip about us . . . Roast chicken I think, Sonia," he said, raising his voice. "Yes, cold, I think, with a nice fresh salad. With —Oh, I don't have to tell you, do I? You can draw up the menu yourself."

It wasn't cook, but Mrs. Preston, going about her duties. She glanced into the study and then went on, with an emphatic sniff. Always fussing over him, that Sonia, couldn't leave him alone. It didn't do to let a man know you were too fond of him; that's what she'd told Ada only that morning. They take advantage . . .

Sonia left the study and made her way along the passageway towards the kitchen. It was always the same, she told herself fiercely. He could always make her feel that she was the only one who mattered. He could be so convincing. He had such charm, such a fascinating smile, and the very touch of his hands sent little shivers of excitement through her. And she was certain that he knew it. He could be so gentle, so understanding. Yes, he had everything: looks, personality—and money.

Someone had once said—or had she read it somewhere?—that she would sooner be married to Mr. Average. Handsome husbands were always a worry. You never knew what they were up to. Well, she was

beginning to think there was something in that.

Gerry was too attractive—and whatever he said, she knew that he was attracted to Mary.

Her mouth tight, she hurried into the kitchen.

Seacliff was a picturesque little fishing village as yet unspoilt by tourists. There were no daily arrival of coaches disgorging holiday-makers; no gift shops, no amusement arcades or trips around the Lighthouse. It was a sleepy little hamlet of stone-built cottages huddling at the foot of the cliffs. There was a tiny church near the headland, a general store, three inns and a cafe. The nearest station was ten miles away and a bus came once a week to take the housewives into town and bring them back, their shopping baskets heavily laden, on a Friday night. There were very few dances in the Church Hall, because dancing was still thought to be sinful. There was a small stone jetty on which fishing nets were hung out to dry and fish-bones, scattered around the cobblestones, were bleached white by the sun. Mary loved it.

"Like it?" Peter shot her a quick glance, worried that she might be bored.

"Immensely. Very sleepy and soothing . . ."

"Not always. On Fridays it's invaded by matelots from the nearby Naval Base."

"Well, I suppose they need to let their hair down now and again," she laughed. "It must be very quiet being stationed in a desolate place like this."

"You're a very understanding person. And a very good nurse, I would think."

"Thank you, kind sir." Mary gave a mock curtsey.

As on their previous meeting she sensed that he was

attracted to her, although this evening she had the impression that something was on his mind. There were times when he seemed lost in thought, his brows furrowed in a frown. He had not met her employer, it seemed, although he had heard about him from his aunt.

"He's a big, ugly chap, isn't he?"

"Oh no, that's Max, his assistant. Gerald—"

"Gerald? Oh yes, I remember, he insisted on that familiarity, didn't he?" Was there a faint note of jealousy in his voice?

Mary colored. "It isn't such a crime, surely? In any case, he must be twice my age—in his forties, at least."

"Handsome?"

"I suppose you could say so. He's tall, and very bronzed."

"I see. And what does this Max person do?"

"I don't really know," she admitted. "There doesn't seem to be a great deal to do there. He's away most of the time, I gather. I should imagine he's some kind of companion."

"You don't walk alone in the grounds at night, do you?" He asked suddenly, after a short silence.

She was startled. "Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I don't know . . . Perhaps I was thinking of that tramp who scared you. I did mention it to the local bobby, and he promised to keep his eyes open. I told him not to bother you, however. You could tell him no more than I had."

"That was very kind of you, Peter."

"Did you mention it to Winchley?"

"The housekeeper—Sonia—brought it up. I hadn't

intended to mention it. He seemed concerned, and relieved that I had come to no harm."

He nodded, then abruptly changed the subject. "It's a gloomy old pile, isn't it? Your first view from the beach—"

She hadn't realized how sombre and somehow sinister the house was, perched high on a pinnacle of rock that rose from the cliffs, a weather-beaten pile of grey stone, its dusty windows gazing out to sea like unseeing eyes.

Only three balconies remained of the original six at the back of the house; the remainder had crumbled away. Massive slabs of masonry and other rubble could be seen lying on the sand among the rocks. Through the ages the house had been beaten and battered by gales and violent storms; the original towers with their crenellated walls still stood, but part of the roof of the West Wing was missing, its rafters exposed to the elements, and Mary was reminded of the ribs of a dead carcase. It seemed to leer slyly, defying death, although nature was slowly and remorselessly eating it away, as though it knew its history and was intent upon destroying it. A black, evil history, for Seacliff House had many dark secrets, and one that still remained to be revealed.

Mary gave a little shiver.

"It seems to squat there, and just watch," she murmured.

"You feel that too? Yes, I agree, I don't like it. I never have."

He could have added that on occasions when he had rowed along the caves nestling amongst the cliffs below the old house it had seemed to emanate a foul

stench that reminded him of the dead and dying, of putrefying flesh. What it could be he had no idea: dead fish, sewage perhaps. But it was an odor that seemed to eat into his very bones, cling to his clothing and fill his lungs, and he had been glad when he had returned to the fresh air, to feel the warmth of the sun upon his face.

He said suddenly: "Is it absolutely necessary for you to live in?"

"At the moment, yes, until Gerald's heart complaint clears up. Why?"

"It's such a depressing old place—"

She turned to face him. "You're not being honest with me, Peter. You're anxious that I shouldn't walk in the grounds, and you're obviously worried about the fact that I have to live in. Why?"

He shrugged again, but his expression was serious. "I just think you'd be happier, staying with my aunt or someone in the village. There's no mystery."

But back in her room, soon afterwards, standing at the window and gazing out over the now mist-enshrouded sea, she wondered if there was another reason. Could he be jealous of Gerald? She remembered the way he had held her hand before leaving. She had thought for a moment that he was about to kiss her, then he had touched his hat, grinned cheerfully, and said would it be okay for another evening? He suggested Sunday, and she agreed, inwardly delighted.

So was he just a little jealous of her handsome, worldly employer? She could not help hoping he was.

But she was, in fact, quite wrong. There was another and more sinister reason for Peter's anxiety.

CHAPTER 7

It seemed to Mary that she had scarcely fallen asleep than quite suddenly she was wide awake—for the second night running.

She had no idea why. One moment she had been lost in a dream, and a happy one at that—she and Peter had been dancing in a luxurious ballroom and he had just suggested that they take a stroll on the terrace. There had been a very romantic full moon and haunting music played softly in the background.

Suddenly Peter's strong arms had clasped her in a tight, passionate hug, and he had rained kisses on her lips. She had responded warmly, fiercely, thrilling to the warmth of him. She had closed her eyes in ecstasy and when she had opened them again shock and revulsion had stabbed through her—for the man kissing her was not Peter, but Gerald Winchley.

He was older, much older, and his hair was white. His eyes were glowing almost bestially; there had been something horrible and animal-like in his swarthy, still handsome, but corrupt face. Someone had laughed—a hideous sound—and it proved to be Sonia, gazing at her from among the nearby bushes, her scarlet lips curled back over her teeth in a grimacing mask of hatred.

Mary remembered screaming—then she was wide awake, lying there trembling, conscious of a thin film of perspiration covering her face.

Had she screamed and woken herself up? Was that it?

A shaft of moonlight bathed the end of her bed in a ghostly glow. She could hear the crash of the waves on the rocks. The wind was beating against the loose window frames and moaning among the eaves. Rain spattered against the glass.

Her eyes had become accustomed to the darkness and she shot a quick, nervous glance towards the door. It was closed. It was almost as though she had expected to find it open, and Gerald standing there.

"Silly little fool," she told herself angrily. What was she getting so jumpy about? She had had a nightmare, that was all, and a sudden gust of rain against the window had awakened her.

She closed her eyes wearily. She would look like nothing on earth before long if she made a habit of waking up like this every night.

Then she froze.

Something had dropped with a plop upon her pillow.

For a split second she lay there, her flesh crawling, her heart pumping wildly against her ribs.

A spider?

She flung herself out of bed. Her trembling fingers groped for and found the button switch on the bedside lamp.

She pressed it—and nothing happened.

The bulb must have gone. She felt her way along the wall to the switch against the door. The center light came on and she glanced towards her pillow.

To her relief there was no sign of a spider or of any

kind of hairy monstrosity that would have terrified the wits out of her.

Something *was* there, however. A small, moist stain. She moved closer, her forehead creased in a puzzled frown.

What on earth—?

It was reddish brown, slowly spreading over the white pillowcase. Another globule was forming on the ceiling and even as she watched, it dropped onto the pillow.

It was bright scarlet and she did not need a second horrifying glance to identify it.

It was blood.

Mary stared in alarm at the ceiling where a third glistening globule was forming. Then she hastily pulled on her dressing-gown.

Someone in the room above must be desperately ill, could be bleeding to death. Had Gerald had a hemorrhage? But no, his room was not above hers. Then . . . ? But what did it matter? She was a nurse and somebody urgently needed medical attention.

She did not hesitate another second.

She hurried out into the corridor and along to the staircase. The floor above was in darkness and she had no idea where the light switches were, but she had brought her small pocket torch.

She mounted the stairs, which creaked beneath her weight, and she gave a little shiver. It was cold, and the odor of damp and decay filled her nostrils.

Carefully she made her way along the passage until she reached the room she believed was immediately above her own.

The door was closed.

She stood there for a moment, glancing apprehensively about her. She had the feeling that she was not alone, that something skulked there in the darkness, watching her. Yet nothing *was* there.

Or was it?

Something rustled in the shadows and she jerked around, levelling the torch. She saw that there was a broken pane in the window at the end of the passage. A faded curtain flapped in the wind which moaned around the old house.

She had acted on impulse and was already beginning to regret it. As a Staff Nurse she was more or less used to acting on her own initiative, but now she wished that she had woken somebody. But it was too late for that now.

She opened the door. It creaked back on rusty hinges. She shone the torch before her and something scuttled behind the skirting, causing her heart to lurch violently.

It was larger than her own room, with panelled walls and a discolored, crumbling ceiling; slats showed through, revealing the dark, starlit sky above. In the center was a rusty bed-frame. Beside it was an old wardrobe, a dresser with a cracked mirror, and some broken chairs.

A junk room, obviously, and never used. Yet her flesh crept for once again she had the feeling that she was not alone, that eyes were watching her. But when she glanced behind her she saw nobody. She even summoned up courage enough to open the big wardrobe, but it was empty.

She felt certain that this was the room immediately

above her own, yet it was obvious that it was unoccupied. There were small pools of water on the floor from the leaking roof, but certainly no blood.

"I'll swear I wasn't mistaken!" she muttered. "Perhaps I am in the wrong room after all."

But although she looked into each room leading off from the passage, she found nothing to alarm her.

They were certainly unoccupied, and evidently used for storing old furniture. One room was furnished, but everything was covered in dustcovers and the only occupants were the giant hairy spiders that scuttled up and down the webs hanging from the rafters.

She turned away. This was a mystery she couldn't understand or explain. No one was up here, much less ill. She turned back along the passage, shining the torch in front of her. As she did so something cold fastened upon her wrist.

She screamed, jerked up the torch, saw the beady eyes, the thin lips in the ghostly pallor of a face, then the world dissolved into a thousand spinning, flashing lights, and she knew no more.

When she recovered consciousness she was lying on the Chesterfield in the lounge.

"Drink this," someone was saying. "Then you'll feel better—"

Something fiery moistened her lips; she swallowed and coughed, then pushed the drink away, grimacing.

Gerald Winchley was sitting on a stool at her side, his handsome face worried and concerned. It was Sonia who held the glass of brandy in her hand; Sonia in a very glamorous, silk robe over a pale blue nightdress.

"No thank you—I feel all right now," Mary stammered and felt herself flushing. She sat up, remembering that she was wearing only her nightdress and dressing-gown, and drew it more closely about her.

Gerald said: "We've been really worried. Max heard a scream and went upstairs to investigate, and found you lying on the floor in a faint. What on earth happened?"

"Somebody was up there. I heard a sound and turned round—and something cold touched my wrist. Then I saw those horrible eyes—" She shivered at the memory.

"You must have had a nightmare," Sonia's lips twisted contemptuously. "Do you make a habit of walking in your sleep?"

"I don't—and I've never sleep-walked in my life," Mary retorted. "Someone was up there—and touched me."

"Perhaps it was our ghost."

"Don't talk like that!" Winchley said sharply. "This is no laughing matter. Did you recognize this . . . this person, Mary?"

Mary shook her head. "No. I saw the eyes and the face. He had very thin lips and his face was deathly white. I caught only a glimpse in the torchlight."

"You say 'He'. Are you sure it was a man you saw?"

"I—I couldn't swear to it. I just saw a face. It was a terrible shock—"

"Of course, it must have been." Gerald leaned forward and patted her hand.

"Well, there's certainly nobody in the house except

ourselves," Sonia snapped. "Max has searched the place from top to bottom. No one else has seen this 'ghost' so she must have been dreaming."

"Our previous nurse did," said Gerald, and looked thoughtful. "However, I must admit I'm puzzled by the whole business. And I don't like it." He glanced at Sonia. "You're sure Max has made a thorough search?"

"Yes." Her blue eyes switched to Mary's face. "But what were you doing up there in the first place? You say you don't walk in your sleep, so why were you wandering about the house in the middle of the night?" Her voice was accusing.

"When I woke up and saw the blood—" Mary began, "I—"

"Blood?" Sonia stared incredulously. "What blood?"

"I woke up suddenly," Mary said, and her voice was calmer now. She knew that the story she was about to tell would sound unbelievable. Already Sonia was staring at her as though convinced she was out of her mind.

"I thought I heard a noise, and I got out and switched on the light. Then I saw the blood on my pillow, it was dripping down from the ceiling. I thought somebody might be hurt in the room above mine, so I went out to look. I don't know where cook sleeps, but it could have been her—"

"And you say you found nothing?" asked Gerald.

"Nothing," she admitted. "The room above mine was empty, like the other rooms."

He rubbed his chin. "I think I'd better take a look at this myself," he said. He got to his feet. "No, you stay

here, Mary. Perhaps you'll help Sonia make some coffee. I'm sure we could all do with some. That's if you feel up to it."

"Of course."

She followed Sonia along the passage and into the kitchen. It was plain that the other girl believed she had had a nightmare, and was bad-tempered because her rest had been disturbed. In a way she couldn't be blamed, Mary supposed.

"I did see somebody, Sonia," she said firmly as she reached up to the old-fashioned dresser for the cups.

"All right, if you say so."

"You don't believe me?"

"Well, how could anybody get in? The doors and windows are always kept locked. And no one could climb these walls. It takes a lot of believing, you must admit."

Mary sighed. "Yes, I suppose it does."

"And if anyone had been hiding in the rooms—assuming you were right—Max would have found them."

The coffee was bubbling in the percolator, filling the kitchen with its fragrant aroma, when Gerald returned. Mary had thought earlier that he had seemed tense and uneasy, despite his efforts to conceal it, but now he was relaxed and smiling.

"The mystery's solved; at least, the mystery of the stain on the ceiling."

Sonia shot him a quick glance. "Oh?" She was pouring coffee. "What was it?"

"Max ripped up a couple of floorboards in the room above Mary's. There's an old water pipe running beneath the floorboards. It's leaking, and what you

thought was blood is, in actual fact, rusty water. That's the trouble with old properties like this, you never know what's going to happen."

"Oh—" Mary bit her lip. She didn't like the sneering, triumphant look on Sonia's face. All too clearly she thought her an hysterical little fool.

"You won't be able to sleep in there again tonight," Gerald went on. "There's quite a large stain on the ceiling now, and it's ruined your bedclothes."

Mary looked dismayed.

"We'll have to find you somewhere else for tonight." He offered a slim silver case. Mary shook her head but Sonia took one. He thumbed his lighter. "I know!" He seemed to come to a sudden decision. "Max's room, adjoining mine. You can have that, and he can sleep on a camp bed in the lounge."

"Oh, I couldn't do that!" Mary protested.

"No, of course not," Sonia said sharply, and her eyes were venomous. "Anyway, it isn't necessary. Mary can have the room next to mine."

For a moment Gerald looked angry, then he was his smooth, smiling self again.

"I leave it to you then, Sonia. After all, you are the housekeeper and you know better than I what accommodation is available."

There was an edge to his voice; there could even have been a veiled threat, Mary thought.

She felt uncomfortable. Nevertheless, she was glad Sonia had suggested another room. She preferred not to sleep in the room adjoining Gerald's, even if only for one night. He had made it clear enough on the beach that he found her attractive, and although she didn't think for a moment that he would make a nui-

sance of himself, it was better to play safe. The last thing she wanted was to arouse Sonia's enmity or ill-feeling in this house.

Gerald might be attractive, with his dark eyes, lazy smile and undoubted charm, his ability to make a girl feel that she was the only one who mattered, but he was not her kind of a man. For one thing, her woman's intuition told her that he was a flirt, and for another she had never been attracted by the bronzed, too good-looking type of man.

"I'll show you your room." Sonia's voice interrupted her thoughts, and after saying goodnight to Gerald and apologizing for disturbing them all, she accompanied Sonia from the lounge.

Sonia said casually: "Well, that mystery's solved. Did you enjoy your evening with Peter?"

Mary was glad to change the subject; glad, too, at the other girl's implied friendliness.

"Yes. We had a drink and a stroll on the beach."

"He's attractive, isn't he?"

"I suppose he is." Mary spoke cautiously, wondering where this line of questioning was about to lead.

"You mean he doesn't ring a bell with you?"

"Well, it's a bit early yet, isn't it?" Mary smiled. "I've only met him twice." She saw no reason why she should reveal her intimate thoughts to Sonia. How she felt about Peter was her own affair.

"Oh well, here's your room—" Sonia yawned, as though in dismissal of the subject. "You'll find blankets and sheets in the linen cupboard. Do you want me to give you a hand?"

"No, I can manage, thanks."

"Very well, then I'll say goodnight." With a brief

nod she went into the adjoining room and closed the door behind her.

Mary collected fresh sheets and blankets and made up the bed. She climbed in, switching off the bedside light, but found it difficult to sleep. She was over-tired, she supposed, and a little on edge. The old house on the cliff in this isolated little fishing village had not proved the restful, soothing place she had expected.

First there had been that sniggering prowler on her first night, now she had aroused the enmity of Sonia, through no fault of her own. Most important, however, was her alarming and sinister experience tonight.

Somebody *had* been wandering around the house. She wasn't given to a vivid imagination—or nerves. As for ghosts, she didn't believe in them. That icy cold hand upon her wrist had been real enough!

And that awful, pallid face—

Who was the prowler, and what had he been doing there?

Another thing—she was positive that the stain which had dripped down from the ceiling had not been rusty water. She had been a nurse too long to have been mistaken.

It had been blood. So why had Gerald lied?

What was going on in this storm-enshrouded house perched high on the cliff top like a vulture poised to pounce?

CHAPTER 8

Mary was not the only one to find it difficult to sleep that night.

Gerald was in a savage mood when he returned to his bedroom. His handsome features were ugly as he lit a cigarette and poured himself a liberal measure of whisky.

"Is that wise?" Max loomed over him, his face concerned, worried. They had known each other a long time. Max liked and respected his employer. Now he toyed with the grubby brown sweater he wore, with thick, sausage-like fingers. He knew that Gerald was a brave man; only a brave man would have come to his aid that night in Tangiers when he had fallen foul of a gang of international gun-runners who had tried to throw him into the bay. He hadn't forgotten that. He never would, and there was a great deal he would do for this sick man.

"Whisky's no good for you," he growled, his beady eyes flashing.

"If you'd been more careful, none of this would have happened," Gerald said thickly.

"I'm sorry," Max said in his deep, throaty voice. "I can't say any more than that. I dumped the Weasel in the Priests' Hole until I was ready to take his body below. How was I to know he'd leak blood through the ceiling?"

Gerald inhaled deeply. He sat slumped in the chair

beside the window, gnawing the edge of his thumbnail, his eyes screwed up against the rising cigarette smoke.

"Who was it she saw?" he muttered. "Who?"

"She was dreaming. She must have been—"

"I don't know." Gerald looked even more worried. "You don't think—?"

"Impossible. Every door, every window, was locked. I doublechecked. Nobody could get in, or out." He gave a wide grin. "Like you said, nobody goes out unless you want them to."

"Even so, she doesn't strike me as the kind of girl to have made it up, or dreamed it. From all accounts she's a first-class, competent nurse, used to private nursing in old houses."

"Still there can't be many like this dump," said Max. "It even gives me the creeps sometimes. Darkness, creaking doors, loose window-frames, noises behind the skirting board." He grinned again, showing his large, very white teeth. "Her nerves were all keyed up. She brushed against a cobweb, spun round expecting to see a ghost—and sees it. It's all in the mind."

"Maybe there is a ghost," Winchley said bluntly. "The other nurse saw one."

"She thought she did. These hysterical dollies give me a pain in the guts."

Winchley gave a start. A new thought had struck him.

"You don't think she's been planted, do you?"

"Mary? Not in a million years. She's too innocent."

"Innocence can be assumed. She could be a darned good actress."

"Forget it. Wasn't she recommended by Framling himself? Now you're the one who's seeing things—danger where none exists. See what I mean? When you're tired and nervy, you get jumpy, suspicious, your brain starts to imagine all kinds of things. She was simply trying to find where that blood was coming from."

"That's another thing, I'm not so sure she swallowed my story about the leaking pipes."

"Well, she'd have a job proving otherwise."

"Even so, I should keep an eye on her, Max. We could be wrong about her."

Max nodded. "Don't worry. If she gets up to any tricks, just leave her to me. I'll know how to deal with her."

He grinned again, and this time it was a smile without humor.

When Mary returned to her own room next morning to dress she saw that the stained pillow case and sheets had been replaced by crisp new ones, smelling faintly of lavender.

There was something else, too.

A large, elegant bottle of perfume stood on the bedside cabinet, a card propped against it. She picked it up.

"I hope last night's experience doesn't mean that you will leave us. Gerald."

Chanel No. 5.

And such a large bottle. It must have cost him a small fortune. But of course, it wasn't really necessary, although she appreciated the gesture. She had no intention of leaving. She wasn't the kind of girl to allow

herself to be scared away from a job; rather the reverse, for her curiosity had been aroused. There was something mysterious –perhaps even sinister going on in this old house and she wouldn't be satisfied until she knew what it was.

She looked at the bottle again, a little uneasily this time. Was it merely the gift of a kind and sympathetic employer anxious not to lose his nurse? Or did it have some deeper significance?

She hoped not. She could never feel "that way" about him, she knew. For one thing, he was approaching forty, almost twice her age. Charming, handsome and fascinating he might be, but he was the type of man who ages quickly once the middle years are past.

Some young girls liked older men, she knew that. But she had no need for a "father figure," the mature man, worldly wise and experienced. When she married it would be to someone young, perhaps a year or two older than herself, someone young and vital, with whom she could share the struggles of saving for a house deposit, sharing a mortgage, putting away a few shillings a week for the little bits and pieces that helped to make a home. Someone whom she would enjoying talking to, dancing with, walking with. Someone who would love her, deeply and passionately. Romantic? She supposed she was seeing love through rose-tinted spectacles. But wasn't that the way all girls saw it?

The reality came afterwards -the struggle to make ends meet, the rows, the bickering, the bitterness. But it didn't last. All couples quarrelled; there must be something wrong with them if they didn't. That was what love was all about; giving and taking, growing

together through adversity as well as happiness. Becoming one person . . .

Was she a square?

All right, perhaps she was. But she didn't want a man with gray streaks in his hair, a man who looked as though he had "been around," however much money he had; however easy he could make life for her.

"I'd better slip that perfume in my case," she told herself, when she was dressed. "I hope to goodness it wasn't there when Sonia changed the sheets."

She wrapped it in a slip and put it carefully away. She was, although she did not know it, already too late.

Sonia had seen the perfume, and she was telling herself that she must do something about it. Gerald wasn't the kind of employer who bought expensive perfume for nothing.

Gerald had breakfast in his room. Mary had hers alone in the vast, gloomy dining room overlooking the sea. Sonia had already breakfasted. Ada Lathom told her so when she brought in her tray, and Max was still asleep.

"What were all the cups doing in my sink last night?" she demanded. "Did you all have a party or something? Because somebody might have told me. Not that I heard a thing. Once I get my head down under the bedclothes nothing wakes me. Though I did think once I heard someone sobbing, and a kind of thin scream. Gave me quite a turn it did, for a minute. Some poor beastie caught in a trap somewhere, I suppose."

"Mind if I join you?" Mrs. Preston poked her head around the door. "I could do with a cuppa." She beamed at them. "How do you like my young man?" She held out a brand-new mop. "Got a smashing hair-cut, hasn't he?"

Mary laughed. "Gerald's in bed apparently and Sonia's had her breakfast, so make yourself at home."

"Ta. Did you notice that funny smell last night? Stronger than ever."

Ada nodded. "It's the heat, I suppose. Fish decaying. Have you ever smelt death—Well, I expect *you* have, Mary. That's what it reminds me of. A block of flats was bombed during the war and the poor creatures were buried for days. The smell was awful . . ."

"Last night it fair put me off me cod and chips," Mrs. Preston said, adding two spoonsful of sugar to her tea.

"You'll put on weight," Mary warned her.

"My Fred says he likes a gal with a bit of meat on her." She laughed merrily, her double chins wobbling.

"How anyone can go fishing against those caves beats me," Ada muttered. "You'd think the smell would keep them away—"

"Fishing? I hadn't noticed anyone."

"Last night," said Ada. "I saw this boat bobbing about down below."

"Couple of lovers perhaps," said Mrs. Preston dreamily. "It's nice and quiet and romantic in a boat."

Ada sniffed. "I wouldn't call it romantic, not with that stink."

Mrs. Preston laughed again, her plump cheeks shining.

"You don't notice anything when you're in love, Ada, not even smells."

"Well, I would," declared Mrs. Lathom. "I've got a very sensitive nose. You might tolerate it once, but not twice, I'm sure. That boat's been there several times at night. Oh well," she added, picking up the plates and cups, "I can't stay here gossiping, like some folk. I've work to do."

"She means me, Mary," laughed Mrs. Preston. "Well, back to the treadmill."

"And you can bring out the breakfast things, Lucy!"

"I'm nothing more than a maid of all work, I do declare."

"I'll give you a hand," Mary offered.

It wasn't until later that she was able to thank Gerald for the bottle of perfume.

"It was nice of you, but quite unnecessary."

Gerald had risen late, had his morning coffee on the terrace where she had brought out his pills and watched him while he swallowed them.

It was a warm, sunny morning and gulls swooped overhead, crying mournfully. It was like a human cry at times, she thought, and she wondered if it was the gulls Ada Lathom had heard.

"Then you don't intend to leave us?" Gerald asked, and she thought he looked relieved.

"Of course not! I expect I was over-tired and imagined someone was in the passage."

He nodded sympathetically.

"It's a very gloomy old place. I did intend to rebuild and renovate more of it, but I don't think I shall now."

"Then you're not going to stay here after all?" Mary was surprised. "I got the impression you had decided to live her permanently."

"I did at first, but I've changed my mind."

Mary looked at him curiously. "May I ask why?"

His expression was thoughtful as he looked at her. He lounged in the white wicker chair, wearing a Paisley dressing gown over a blue T-shirt and blue trunks.

"Oh, many reasons," he said, almost to himself. "Things haven't quite worked out. I mean, perhaps it is too quiet after all. It's at the end of nowhere, and it *is* terribly depressing. Don't you think so?"

"I rather like it here," she said.

"I find that somewhat surprising coming from a pretty young girl like you. Most young people I know prefer a somewhat gayer life. You know, pop music, dancing, noise, the company of others of their own age, all-night parties—"

She smiled. "That's true. I'm no different from anyone else my age. It's just that right now I want to be quiet, to relax."

His hand closed about hers. "You had an unhappy love affair?" His eyes were sympathetic.

"It's all over now—"

"I like you, Mary," he said softly. You're not grasping, you're not greedy. Obviously I am a man of considerable wealth, but I don't think that means anything to you. You know, I haven't known you very long but—"

"Please, you mustn't talk like that!" She tried to withdraw her hand, but his grip tightened.

"Don't misunderstand me, Mary. I mean it, and I've

been doing a lot of thinking. You're good for me, and you have your professional qualifications. I like having you around. You have no family, no attachments—" he went on quickly, as she opened her mouth to speak "—I want you to come with me when I leave here. As my companion-nurse," he added. "Don't get the wrong idea. We'll tour the world. Anywhere you like. Somewhere warm, not cold and depressing like it is here—"

"It's very kind of you, Gerald," she said, "but I couldn't possibly—"

"Think about it," he said, releasing her hand as footsteps sounded across the lounge. He spoke almost in a whisper. "I don't think you would regret it. I'm not a difficult man. We could have a lot of fun. Think it over. I'm offering you the chance of a lifetime. When we grew tired of a place we could move on to the next. You told me you always wanted to travel."

"I'll . . . I'll think about it," she stammered, but she knew there was no question of her decision. She did not want to go anywhere with Gerald, professionally or otherwise. He was, she suspected, a man who quickly grew tired of women. And in two or three months, anyway, if he continued to make progress, he would certainly not need a nurse. And most definitely she had no intention of being anything else to him.

Perhaps he thought that once they were abroad in some exotic setting, she would fall in love with him. That in an atmosphere of luxury and gaiety, in a world so different from the one to which she was used, she would find him irresistible.

Well, he was wrong. She felt nothing for him, and never would. In fact, thinking of his suggestion, she experienced a feeling almost of revulsion.

He was what she called "deep," a smooth talker, conceited, very sure of himself and his power of domination over women. He thought that no girl could fail to fall for his charm and good looks—and, of course, his money. But he was mistaken in this case. Also, she had a feeling that there was another side to his nature; the side he hadn't so far revealed. There was cruelty in the set of his mouth and jawline; sometimes she believed she had seen it flicker in his dark eyes. A mystery man. That was Gerald Winchley, and the mystery centered about this old house.

And, of course, he was a liar.

What she had seen last night had been blood. There was no doubt about it in her mind. Someone had been hurt, badly hurt, someone in this house.

At the first opportunity she meant to take another look around upstairs. It had been dark last night; she could so easily have missed something. Perhaps she had, after all, been in the wrong room; it was easy to lose ones way in a place like this.

But it had been blood—and a considerable pool, to enable it to seep through the ceiling that way.

"You're very quiet?" His voice broke across her thoughts.

"I'm sorry. I was thinking."

"About my offer?"

"Perhaps," she answered lightly. "Now I must make out my report for the doctor. By the way, when do you expect him?"

"Didn't I tell you? He telephoned last night while

you were out. He's gone to London for a few days, but there's a number if you need him. Okay?"

"Fine. Now I must be off."

He watched her slim, shapely figure as she entered the lounge, and he was smiling to himself.

"Max was right," he said. "She's no more than she seems—just an innocent."

He did not know how wrong his remark was to prove.

Mary passed Sonia without seeing her for the simple reason that she had been standing in an alcove between the bookshelves.

She had overheard every word, and the expression on her lovely face was not pleasant to see.

CHAPTER 9

Two men sat sprawled on the beach. They had driven down from London in a big black car and had spent the morning aimlessly, or so it seemed, wandering about the village, talking to first one and then the other of the local inhabitants, visiting the Fisherman's Arms, where they were generous with their offer of drinks.

Kabri was the name of one of them: a tubby, paunchy little man, who frequently dabbed at his forehead with a perfumed silk square. He had small eyes, lost in folds of soft pink flesh. The Front Man, some people called him. He instilled confidence in clients; he was shrewd, with a razor-sharp brain. The man with the king-size cigars.

His companion was thin, colorfully dressed, and because of this he was known as Peacock. He wore red velvet trousers, with flared bottoms, a pink ruffled shirt and a silk scarf tied about his throat. His hair was long and shoulder-length and there were a variety of rings, some cheap, some expensive, on his fingers.

"You're looking very pretty today," said Kabri with a sneer. "It's a wonder to me you don't paint your toenails. Or do you?"

Peacock replied with a foul word which seemed to sit oddly on his tongue.

He was good-looking in an effeminate way. He had eyes that would have been attractive in a woman, and

his lashes were long and dark. He had a woman's hands also, slim and shapely. His skin was smooth and unblemished, and his lips were small and well-shaped. Dressed in female clothes, he might easily have passed for a woman. But looks can be deceptive and in this instance they were. Peacock was a very unpleasant young man with a sardonic sense of humor and some equally unpleasant quirks to his character.

"I don't like it," he said presently.

"Don't like what?"

Kabri lazily studied his plump fingers. They were grubby and he found this offensive. He liked nice clean hands and when possible he washed them a great deal.

"Weasel not showing up," said Peacock.

"He will." Kabri belched noisily and surveyed the beach. That one was a right doll; the black bikini suited her, and so did the big black glasses she wore. They did suit some girls.

"Supposing he was right about you-know-why being down here—and was spotted."

"Weasel can take care of himself," said Kabri blandly.

"I once saw him work over a dog in the desert. It wasn't nice to see—and I'm not squeamish."

"You don't have to tell me." Nice, very nice. She could swim, too. Well, he supposed a lot of them did when they had the sea right outside their front doors.

"But he'd be no match for Max—"

"Eh?" Reluctantly Kabri turned his head and gazed into his companion's sullen features. Hell, he thought, he's a nasty bit of work when he looks like that. Heaven help anyone who crosses him. "What did you say?"

"I said Weasel was tough—and smart. But so is Max. If *he* is here, and Weasel was pretty sure that he was, he could have set him up for Max to deal with. I don't like it. It's not like him not to meet us when he knew we were coming."

Kabri patted the pocket of his well-tailored gray suit. He found his cigars. He lit one slowly, continued to watch the girl in the sea.

He said quietly: "Forget him for a moment. What are the facts? He discovers our friend is somewhere in this district. Right?"

"Yes."

"We've talked to people in pubs and cafes. No one's seen anyone who even resembles him. Well, it could be he isn't a local."

"What does that mean?" Peacock picked up a pebble, weighed it in his hand, and savagely flung it towards the sea. "That Weasel was wrong? He wouldn't have brought us all this way on a wild-goose chase."

"I mean," said Kabri impatiently, "that they could be living somewhere further inland. A cottage, or a farmhouse, in one of the surrounding villages. Seacliff just happened to be where Weasel saw them."

Peacock scowled. The thought of driving around the village again, talking to what he mentally regarded as "a lot of hayseeds" irritated him.

"There must be at least a dozen villages around here. I've been looking at the map. It's going to be murder—"

"That comes later," said Kabri, with a tight smile. "Just keep thinking of that and you won't feel so bad about it. So instead of sitting on our backsides, it's

time we got busy. We'll make this our headquarters. When Weasel shows up—"

"*If* he shows up—"

"All right, if he shows up, we're bound to run into him. But first we'll take a look at that place—"

He jerked his head towards the house etched against the sky a quarter of a mile away. Even though it was bathed in sunshine it seemed somehow to be evil and sinister.

"It's got a new owner, they say. But few people have seen him. That interests me."

"The description doesn't fit him."

"It's not difficult to alter one's appearance," Kabri spoke irritably, idly twisting the gold band on his index finger. "All I want is one look, then if it isn't him, we'll go further afield. But it wouldn't surprise me to find him lording it up there. You know, Peacock, you've got to study people, then you learn a lot. Some people would call it psychology. You know how folk are going to react. Now Percy would enjoy living in an old house like that. He always did have big ideas, you know, the local squire scene . . ."

"Go on. He'd sooner be with the birds in some smart bar in the South of France," jeered Peacock. "Smooching in a night club. That's more his scene."

"I know and he knows that we know . . . but not when he's ill, remember. So he comes to a dump like this to recuperate, build himself up for what you were talking about."

"Dump is right. There's nothing doing when the pubs close—no clubs, dances, dolly birds or wife-swapping parties—"

"Not everyone like you has a sewer for a mind. Now come on, let's take a closer look at that house. I've a hunch we may see someone we know."

When Mary left the terrace she went straight up to her room and, sitting by the window with the sun on her face, made out her daily report.

But her mind was not on her work. Her thoughts constantly strayed to the events of the previous night, and her eyes to the brownish colored stain on the ceiling above her bed.

Why had they lied about that stain? Who had been hurt? What had they got to hide? Why had she failed to find any sign of blood in the room above this? Again and again the questions chased each other across her mind and again she failed to find satisfactory answers.

"Maybe I'll have better luck looking around in the daylight," she reflected, rising to her feet.

A few minutes later she was going quietly and cautiously along the passage on the top floor. In the daylight that filtered through the holes and cracks in the ceiling she saw that the floorboards were riddled with wormholes. There were heaps of plaster, the wallpaper was faded and discolored and peeling away from the walls. The sour smell of rotting fabric and decay hung over everything.

Through a jagged hole in the ceiling above her head, she gazed up at the heavy old roof beams. They certainly built houses to last for centuries in those olden days, she thought. The sky above was clouding over again, and the wind was beginning to howl

among the rafters. Wings fluttered suddenly and she jumped as something flew out through the hole in the roof.

Then she went on again.

Once she thought she heard a sound behind her as though she were being followed. She had the uncanny feeling, too, that eyes were watching her—but as on the night before, she saw nothing. It must be her imagination; in spite of what she had told Gerald, the place *was* beginning to get on her nerves.

She paused outside the open doorway and peered into the room with the single iron bedstead. No, she had not been mistaken last night. She was convinced this room was the one immediately above her own.

Had Gerald spoken the truth when he had said a rusty pipe was leaking?

There was no sign of a stain on the old floorboards, and the boards themselves gave no indication of being recently lifted. Yet she distinctly remembered Gerald saying that Max had removed them to get at the pipes. It began to look as though they had lied for some reason known only to themselves.

She stood there, biting her lower lip, then moved to the center of the room. She stared about her. It was, she reflected, smaller than her own room, though last night she had got the impression that it had been larger. Perhaps because of the absence of furniture. It was just as long, but slightly narrower, perhaps two feet or more.

Suddenly she felt a flicker of excitement. That two feet could make all the difference!

She looked with renewed interest at the oak panel-

ling; her mind suddenly filled with pictures from a historical film she had seen. The Roundheads had surrounded an old house in which they believed a wounded Royalist cavalier had taken refuge. When the family realized Cromwell's troops were closing in they had hidden the wounded officer in a Priests' Hole behind the panelling, and had thus saved his life.

Supposing there was a small room or secret passage behind the wall, immediately above her bed? Supposing someone had been held a prisoner there?

A thrill of excitement swept through her as she moved closer to the wall. She ran her trembling hands over the panelling, exploring with her fingertips, feeling for a secret button, pressing knots in the wood.

And then, quite suddenly, she heard a soft rustling sound outside in the passage.

She spun round and darted to the door, her heart hammering. She was just in time to see someone disappear around a bend in the corridor.

She stared incredulously. The figure had been that of a young woman with golden hair, sharp features, almost eerie in appearance and wearing an ankle-length white dress of satin and lace.

Into her mind flashed the legend of the ghost of the woman who was said to haunt the old house. Almost as quickly she rejected the idea. Ghosts didn't exist —and even if they did, they went through walls and not along passages.

So who was the young woman wandering about the house? Was she connected in some way with this mystery?

"There's only one way to find out," she told herself grimly. "That was certainly no ghost. Ghosts don't wear dresses that rustle."

She began to run soundlessly in pursuit. As she reached the spot where she had seen the woman she glimpsed her again, twenty yards ahead, disappearing from sight.

Mary sped after her on tiptoe. As she did so there came a crack like a pistol shot. She sent a horrified glance towards the ceiling, saw the beam crashing down towards her. She screamed and leapt to one side.

She was a split second too late.

The end of the beam struck her, knocking her to the ground. From somewhere near at hand she could have sworn she heard a mocking laugh, then she plunged down into a black bottomless pit and she knew no more.

When she came to, she was conscious of the weight pinning her to the floor.

She opened her eyes and stared dazedly about her. Her head was aching intolerably, but as the mists cleared from her brain she remembered the sharp crack and the falling beam, the ghostly figure she had been following, that mocking laugh. She glanced around her apprehensively.

But no one was there. She was quite alone.

Her next thought was that she might be badly hurt. She cautiously explored her body, her arms and shoulders; but apart from the fact that her right foot was pinned beneath the end of the beam, no bones appeared to be broken.

"Thank God for that!" she said fervently, and shuddered to think what would have happened to her if she had been a second slower in leaping clear.

She tried to pull her leg free but it was firmly trapped beneath the beam. She levered herself into a sitting position and thrust against it with both hands. It did not move an inch.

Red in the face from her exertions she lay back on the floor, breathing deeply as she recovered her breath. She tried again, pushing against the beam until the muscles in her back cracked and she could feel the blood pounding in her head.

The beam moved an inch.

She rested again, sucking the air into her lungs, then tried once more. She heaved and pushed until the veins stood out in her throat and the perspiration glistened on her forehead. But she could not move the blackened, worm-eaten bulk of wood.

She lay back and stared about her desperately, a hint of panic in her eyes now.

She was lying on the floor in the passage between two rooms. The door on her left was closed, but there was no door at all to the room on her right. Its walls were crumbling and the room was littered with dust. A flight of wooden steps led upwards and she suddenly realized that she was lying beneath one of the ruined towers at the corner of the house. In the distance she could hear the waves washing on the beach, the melancholy ringing of a bell buoy. The wind was chill on her face and on her legs.

Of the mysterious woman wearing the dress of a bygone age there was no sign. She had vanished as quickly and mysteriously as she had appeared.

Yet she must have known what had happened; she must have heard Mary's scream and the crash of the falling beam.

Why didn't she come to her aid?—or had she been mistaken, and the woman had really been a ghostly apparition? Certainly she had made no sound, except for that faint rustling of her gown—and she could have been mistaken about that. The old house was full of strange rustling noises—mice behind the skirting boards, dried leaves in the empty rooms . . .

"Oh, rubbish!" she told herself angrily. "Of course it wasn't a ghost."

In which case, the mysterious woman knew of her predicament and had no intention of coming to her aid. Perhaps she was an intruder and was afraid to raise the alarm, which would make her presence known to the others in the house. The woman had not been Sonia, and certainly not Ada Lathom or Mrs. Preston. In the fleeting glimpse she had had of the woman's face she felt sure it was the same thin, cruel-lipped face she had seen the night before.

The thought of lying there, perhaps for hours, unable to move, scared her and she began to shout for help. Her voice echoed hollowly, was flung back from the walls—almost mockingly, it seemed.

But no one came. There was only the sound of the rising wind beneath the eaves, the drip of rain on her face, the plopping noise of water from a broken drainpipe.

"Help! Help!"

Again and again she raised herself, shouting at the top of her voice, until finally she realized that she was wasting her breath.

No one could hear her.

She would have to lie here until she was found, until they missed her and came to look for her. Gerald knew that parts of the old house were dangerous—surely, as soon as she was missed, he would organize a search party?

Wouldn't he?

Supposing he didn't? Supposing he believed that she did not accept his story of the rusty pipes leaking onto her bed; supposing he suspected that she was suspicious of something inside the house?

A new and chilling thought leapt to her feverish brain.

The whole incident might have been carefully planned to trap her, to lure her up here. The winds battering against the house on the cliffs would be their explanation for the falling beam—when she was finally found, dead, and her death reported to the police. They might not even report it. She had no relatives, no friends. She might just disappear and no one would be any the wiser.

No, that wasn't true. Peter and his aunt knew that she was here. So they couldn't leave her to die in some secret passage. But they could still pitch her body off the roof and into the sea, couldn't they? And then report that she had disappeared, perhaps got tired of the isolated house and gone back to London.

There was ice trickling through her veins now; the chill of fear.

Then she gritted her teeth. For Heaven's sake, get a grip on yourself, she muttered. You're letting your imagination run riot. Behaving like a lunatic, in fact. Of course Gerald will come to look for you; why

shouldn't he? If there is a mystery connected with this house, it doesn't necessarily mean that he is involved; or even that there is danger. It could be that Max is up to something unknown to his employer; that he might have reasons for wanting to frighten her away.

After all, it was Max who had lied, she remembered. It was Max who had told Gerald about the leaking pipes and said that he had removed the floorboards to get at them. And naturally Gerald had accepted his word. He wouldn't go prowling around, doubting him, investigating on his own.

Of course. That was the answer. She had nothing to fear. Perhaps even now Gerald was instigating a search, realizing that something was wrong.

She fought to pull herself together, to relax, to think calmly. She remembered her training—to keep cool in a crisis.

It was then she saw the rat.

It was big and fat, its brownish body covered with patchy, rusty-looking hair. It had appeared from behind a heap of fallen masonry and was scuttling along the beams halfway up towards the ceiling, almost immediately overhead. She had a terrified feeling that it would fall on her. And yet the rat seemed to have no idea that she was there; it seemed hungry and was scampering along the beam searching for food. It sniffed and scratched, gnawing at the wood with its sharp yellow teeth.

Mary watched it in fascinated horror, scarcely breathing, her eyes rivetted on the obscene, swollen body. She heard it scratching at something out of sight, then there was a long silence. Several minutes passed and it did not reappear.

The tension was beginning to ooze from her when the rat scuttled back into view once more. It stiffened in the center of the overhead beam as though this time it had caught her scent, or a movement, had suddenly become aware that it was not alone. Its head, with its beady eyes and long quivering nose suddenly stared down at her.

Mary wondered if it could smell the perspiration on her, like a dog; whether it could sense her fear.

Suddenly it jumped from the rafter and into the room, landing heavily, less than ten yards from her.

Mary screamed.

The rat did not move. It stood there, its sides rising and falling as it breathed, its beady eyes fixed on her face.

She screamed again and began to beat her fists on the floorboards. The rat scampered away into a corner then turned and sat watching her; it seemed to know she could not get away.

"Oh, help! Help me! Please, somebody, please help me!"

She was shivering now as though she had a fever. Her eyes seemed to be bulging from her head as she lay on her right cheek, watching the rat, which had now moved to her right, but perhaps half a yard closer. Was it wondering whether to retreat or attack?

Again and again, Mary's cries rang out, but they merely bounced back emptily from the walls and roof. It was getting darker now, for storm clouds were again forming overhead. In her mind's eye she could see the rat scuttling nearer, sniffing, watchful and wary but growing ever bolder.

Her flesh crept at the thought and she struggled

frantically to pull herself free of the beam. She knew that if she did not succeed in doing so before darkness settled over the room she would go out of her mind with fear. When they found her—*if* they found her—she would be insane, a gibbering madwoman.

The rat moved forward another yard . . .

CHAPTER 10

"I don't understand it," Mrs. Preston said, puffing at her after-lunch cigarette.

"Didn't come in for her lunch," said Ada Lathom disapprovingly. She took that personally.

"Perhaps she went into the village and met her young man and had lunch with him." Mrs. Preston looked reminiscent. "Did I ever tell you about the time me and my Fred had these whelks at Southend? Well, afterwards, we—"

"A well-bred young lady would have informed me that she would not be in for lunch," said Ada stiffly.

"That's it. I would definitely say she was well-bred," nodded Mrs. Preston. "Well, as I was saying, afterwards—"

"Then, if you consider she is well-bred—as I do—where is she?"

Mrs. Preston sighed. She knew that what had happened on that lovely day at Southend would have to wait for another time. It was too good an anecdote to waste when Ada was in such an unreceptive mood.

"Perhaps she went for a stroll on the beach and has got cut off by the tide. It can be very dangerous at times, you know . . . But perhaps she didn't know, if you know what I mean."

Ada Lathom blanched.

"Oh, the poor child! Do you really think . . ." She got up and hurried to the kitchen window, gazed out,

then sat down again. "No, she can't have. There's someone out there, fishing, two men in a boat. They would have seen her, and rescued her, presumably. You did say you had looked in her room?"

"No, *I* didn't—but her ladyship did, and she said she wasn't there."

"Where did she think she might be, then?"

"She said perhaps Mary had gone out in the car with Mr. Winchley." Mrs. Preston leaned her elbows on the table and helped herself to another biscuit.

"Well that could be so, but it's odd that he didn't mention it. If she has gone with him, I'll warrant Sonia didn't approve."

"I'll bet she didn't. Not that I care for her likes and dislikes; I don't like her. All the airs and graces she gives herself, you'd think she was mistress of this place, not merely the housekeeper."

"If she ever is," said Mrs. Lathom, "then that's the day I leave. As you know, Lucy, I'm used to cooking for the gentry. Mr. Winchley may not be a gentleman in the sense that I understand it, although quite obviously he has money. But he does have charm and good manners, which I can't say the same for about her ladyship."

"I've just thought of something," broke in Mrs. Preston excitedly.

"What?"

"Perhaps she went exploring."

"Exploring? Where, in Heaven's name?"

"The house, of course. You know it's dangerous in parts—those rotten old floorboards and creaking beams. My Fred said it should have been pulled down years ago."

For a moment Mrs. Lathom looked alarmed. She started to get up, then sat down again, shaking her head.

"No, she wouldn't do that—not after what happened last night."

Mrs. Preston pricked up her ears. "What's that? *What* happened last night?"

"Well, it was rather strange, you see—Mary thought she saw a ghost. *The* ghost . . ."

The cigarette dropped from Mrs. Preston's lips to the kitchen table and she leaned forward, her face red with curiosity.

"I didn't know anything about it," she said. "Come on, Ada, tell me . . ."

"Forget about it, try to pretend it isn't there," the voice inside Mary told her. It was cool, calm, steadying, fighting the hysteria that swelled and threatened to engulf her. "You know you can do it. You know you can. Just keep trying to release your foot. Oh God, don't let it come any nearer! *Don't* . . ."

The rat was watching her. It had moved forward another yard and its claws scraped on the floorboards. Its eyes were hard and beady, unblinking, and its patchy hair was covered with dust.

Mary forgot her own counsel and screamed again, shouting wildly for help. At the same time she continued to try to drag her foot from beneath the imprisoning beam.

Then there came another thud, a scratching of claws. Her flesh crawled and her eyes dilated.

A second rat had leapt down from the rafter. Almost immediately came another, and then another,

until there were at least half a dozen of them, running along the passage in a small group. They were coming closer, closer—

"Oh God, help me!" she prayed.

She began to pound frantically on the floorboards with her fists.

"Help! Help! Please come, somebody! I'm here . . ."

Suddenly she gave a gasp of relief. The rats were scuttling away, leaping towards holes in the floorboards. They could be heard scampering along their tunnels beneath, twittering angrily, like birds. Their flight could only mean that somebody was coming; that her cries for help had been heard, after all.

The cook, perhaps; Sonia, or even Mrs. Preston. It could be anybody, but she didn't care who it was, as long as they came. She knew that she was sobbing, although no sound came from her lips.

Whoever it was, he or she was nearer now, carefully picking a way along the corridor, avoiding the heaps of rubble; she saw the flicker of a torch dancing on the floor and on the walls of the passage.

Suddenly a new fear possessed her, born of her recent terror. Supposing the person approaching was an enemy; somebody who wanted her out of the way; who had come to make sure that she could not voice any suspicions she might have to the outside world.

The person must have heard her cries, why hadn't he answered?

She lay there trembling, bathed in perspiration, her clothes clinging damply to her, her teeth chattering.

A moment later she was blinded by the glare from

a powerful torch. She screwed up her eyes, averted her head. She heard a gasp of astonishment.

Then somebody was kneeling beside her.

"Mary!"

She felt the tension and fear slip from her. She cried out in her relief, clinging to him.

"Peter! Oh, Peter—"

"Hold on, I'll soon have you out of here." His voice was low, controlled. No panic or fuss. Just strong, dependable arms about her, calming her terror.

She felt the weight lifting from her leg. Firm hands felt her foot, explored her ankle.

"No bones broken, thank God, but you'll have a nasty bruise come tomorrow morning," he said. "You're lucky it's no worse."

He lifted her, and she continued to cling to him. He could feel her quivering in his arms.

"Steady," he said gently.

"There—there were rats here," she said, her voice breaking. "Oh, Peter, it was horrible! If you hadn't come . . . I'm sure they were getting ready to attack me."

"Don't think about it," he said tenderly. "It's all over now."

They stood close in the darkness, his arms supporting her protectively. She felt safe against the warmth of him, was comforted by his reassuring voice. Presently she was calmer.

"Do you feel like telling me about it?"

"Can't we go down—"

"Not for the moment. I'll explain. I want to know how you got into this fix."

"It was the woman," she said. She felt better now,

her nerves steadier. It was as though a dark curtain was lowering in her mind, not entirely removing the horror, but deadening its intensity, its vividness.

"What woman?"

"I think . . ." She gave a nervous little laugh. "I think it was a ghost!"

"A ghost!" He sounded incredulous. "You mean, the one your predecessor was supposed to have seen?"

"I—I think it must have been."

She told him all that happened from the first moment she had seen the woman with the golden hair gliding along the corridor.

"I'm sure it was done deliberately," she said, glancing nervously about her. "She purposely lured me along this corridor. I'll swear I heard somebody laughing when the beam crashed down."

"The same laughter you heard in the barn that time?"

"I'm . . . I'm not sure. It could have been."

"You think she knew the beam was already dangerous, and pushed it down in an attempt to kill you?"

Mary was silent for a moment.

"Yes . . . But I suppose it *could* have been the force of the wind. It was blowing a gale. But I've a feeling it wasn't the wind. If she didn't do it on purpose, why didn't she come back to help me? She must have heard the beam fall, heard me cry out—"

Peter said slowly: "Do you think it could have been a man?"

"A *man?*" She stiffened in his arms, shocked.

"Yes. Dressed up—"

"I . . . I hadn't thought. I mean, she was so slim,

wearing this long white dress. Why do you say it could have been a man?"

"Did you see the . . . the ghost's face?"

"I'll never forget it!"

"Anyone you recognized?"

"No. It had a horrible face. Thin, cruel, wax-white, like somebody dead. Oh Peter, I don't understand! There's something strange going on in this house, and I don't know what it is." Then she remembered something and paused to look at him. "But what are *you* doing here? How did you get in?" She broke off with a quick intake of breath; there was the sound of movement at the far end of the corridor.

"Mary! Mary! Are you up there?"

It was Gerald Winchley. His voice sounded strained, slightly breathless, as though he had been hurrying.

Instantly, Peter released her. His voice came urgently, quietly in her ear.

"Don't say I've been here. Say you finally managed to get your foot free. I'll be in touch—"

She felt the squeeze of his hand in hers, then he had disappeared in the darkness. She was too astonished to protest.

"Mary! Are you up here?"

"Yes . . . here." she was in complete control of herself now. "I've hurt my ankle."

Had he been involved in the attempt to kill her, and was returning to find out if the plan had been successful? She must not let him see that she suspected there had been any plot at all.

She heard a muttered exclamation, the sound of hurrying footsteps.

When Gerald reached her a moment later she was

sitting on the floor beside the beam, massaging her right ankle. It was tender, and she winced.

"Mary! Good Lord, what happened?" He was beside her, shining his torch about the room, then back to her face.

"There was an accident. But I'm all right now," Mary found herself saying. "Except that I'm afraid I've sprained my ankle."

"Here, let me give you a hand." He lifted her. "Put your arm around my waist, I'll support you. Careful, now . . . That's better. We'll take it slowly . . ."

Ten minutes later she was sitting in the lounge, pillows propped behind her back. Steaming hot coffee and sandwiches were on a small table beside her. Gerald was smoking jerkily, his face pale with shock. Sonia stood by the Adam fireplace, in a tight-fitting dress; she looked, Mary thought with a faint touch of envy, very attractive. She herself felt suddenly grubby and untidy, like a small child. Her hair was awry, hanging limply over her forehead, her clothes and hands were filthy, her fingernails broken.

"I can't believe it—" Gerald muttered. He looked anxious, his dark eyes uneasy and puzzled.

"You mean you don't believe I saw this . . . this person?" said Mary. Was it all a charade, this concern, or was it genuine? She had learned in the brief time she had known him, that you couldn't tell with Gerald. He was a man with two faces. You could never read his true thoughts.

"Of course I believe you," he said soothingly, and now he was smiling again. "I mean, I can't understand about the ghost. I know the house has a reputa-

tion for being haunted by a young woman—you know its history? She was the mistress of a wealthy London banker in the sixteenth century, and he killed her to make way for his latest fancy. But I've never believed the story, myself. I know Nurse Eldman professed to see it, but I thought she was merely highly-strung, imagining things. I personally have never seen this so-called 'ghost,' and to the best of my knowledge nobody else in the house has done so."

"I certainly saw something—or someone," Mary said deliberately.

"If you'll excuse me saying so, for a nurse you *do* seem to be somewhat on the imaginative side," said Sonia, and there was a flicker of sarcasm in her voice. "Ever since you came here you've been indulging in all sorts of odd fancies—cold hands gripping your wrist, bloodstains on the ceiling, white-faced women prowling the corridors. I mean to say, I thought nurses were always so calm and practical, as part of their training—"

Gerald gave her an angry look. "Please leave this to me, Sonia," he said. He turned back to Mary. "Do you think it was somebody dressed up?"

Mary was still smarting from the lash of Sonia's tongue. "Like you, I don't believe in ghosts," she said.

He bit his lip. "I see."

"What made you go up there, in the first place?" Sonia asked. "It isn't exactly part of your duties to go prowling around the place, is it?"

For a moment Mary was tempted to give an angry reply, but controlled herself. Two could play at this game of mystery, she thought. Let them have something to think about.

"I thought I heard noises up there," she said.

"Noises?" Gerald frowned. "What kind of noises?"

"I don't exactly know . . ." They must not suspect that she disbelieved their story of the leaking water pipe. "Dragging noises. I was sitting in my room writing out my report when I left you on the terrace, Gerald, and I heard these peculiar sounds."

"This old house is full of peculiar sounds," Sonia said. "I'd have thought you would have realized that by now. Bits and pieces are always falling off the ruined wing in these high winds. It used to scare *me*." Her voice was suddenly a little friendlier and Mary wondered why.

"I expect you're right," said Gerald, but he still looked thoughtful. "Now I think you've talked, enough, Mary. You ought to go to your room and rest. You're sure you don't want me to send for the doctor?"

Mary summoned a smile. "Physician, heal thyself,'" she said, "My ankle is only tender, and I know how to deal with that."

"Very well. Sleep tight, and don't bother to get up too early in the morning."

"I'll be all right by then," she said. Wishing them both good night, she went from the room.

When she had gone Gerald tugged at the bell rope beside the fireplace and a few minutes later Max lumbered into the room. He wore his grubby polo-necked jersey and the muscles swelled and rippled in his long arms. He stared at them with tired eyes.

"What's up?" he asked.

Gerald told him. "I thought I told you to keep an eye on her," he said savagely.

Max pulled at his ear. "Well, I can't very well go into her room, can I?" he defended himself.

"It's dangerous up on that floor. She could have been seriously hurt."

"Well, she shouldn't go up there, should she? Nobody asked her to go sniffing and snooping around. You should tell her."

"She thought she heard noises up there."

Max's eyes flickered. "Did she? You want me to look?"

"Yes."

Max shot a quick glance at Sonia, whose expression was venomous. Then he turned away, nodding. "Okay. Don't worry. You know you shouldn't get burned up about anything in your state of health."

"Leave my health out of it," Gerald snapped. "I'm all right. Better than I've ever been."

"You know best."

As he went out of the room Sonia flung herself down in a leather armchair and studied the handsome owner of Seacliff House with angry eyes.

"You're so concerned about her, aren't you?" she sneered.

"Am I? Well, it's only natural."

"Natural! What does that mean?" she asked sharply.

"I don't want her to hurt herself, that's all. Natural concern. I feel responsible for her while she's here, as I do for any of my staff."

"So that's how you explain it?" Her voice was heavy with sarcasm. "I haven't noticed you looking at Mrs. Lathom or Mrs. Preston with that cow-like anxiety in your eyes."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Sonia! It means nothing. You know that. We've already been over this ground, so let's forget it."

He came over to her, smiled down at her.

"Why do I have to keep reassuring you, Sonia? You know where we stand. You know how I feel about you. There isn't anyone else: there never will be."

"That's what you tell me," she said fiercely. "But it's simply words, words . . . no action. We were happy until she came. Now you're continually talking, thinking, worrying about her."

"Don't talk nonsense!" His own voice was sharp now. "She's not my type, and never could be. Have you looked at her? Well, do! Then take a look at yourself, in the mirror."

"It doesn't make any difference." She made an angry gesture with her slim hand. "I know you, Gerry. It was the same with the other nurse. I heard you."

"What do you mean, you heard me?" He looked alarmed.

"This morning—"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said impatiently. "Go to bed, Sonia, you're tired; your nerves are on edge. This has been upsetting for all of us. And besides, I've got things to do."

"Don't avoid the issue." Her lovely face was sullen. "I heard you this morning. You were trying to persuade her to go abroad with you." Her voice rose. "You didn't tell *me* you were fed up with this place. I thought you said you were going to live here permanently; that you'd retired, that this was just the kind of place you'd dreamed about."

"So it is."

"Then what's all this about leaving, and taking her with you?"

"Very well, it's true. I don't intend to stay here, after all. I don't like the climate. But when I go, you'll go with me."

"Then why did you invite her?"

"I didn't."

"You're a liar!"

His face darkened with rage and his temper flared. "I don't have to stand here, listening to you. You've no hold over me. We've had fun, you've been well treated. If you don't like it, you can get out."

She jumped up, anger making her face blotchy. Her fists were clenched until the knuckles showed white.

"You don't get rid of me as easily as all that, Gerald Winchley!" she panted. "You said we were going to get married. You promised me. You said I'd been 'good for you.' I've looked after you in every possible way. You're not going to throw me out now you've got tired of me . . ."

"I'm not tired of you." He felt weary, exhausted. He was in no mood for a fight. "You ought to know that by now. The girl means nothing to me. Now, why don't you believe that? I'm fed up with these rows, and I won't have them, do you understand? There's no reason for them?"

They glared at each other. Then he came closer, and his arms went about her. He kissed her hair, her nose, her ears. He ran his hand lightly over her blonde head.

"Don't let's quarrel," he said. "Life's too short. We'll have fun abroad, I promise."

"You should have told me before," she said sullenly.

When his arms went about her, she knew she was lost. Her anger melted; she couldn't fight him. He had this strange power over her. She had known many men in her life, but never one like Gerald. His voice, the way he smiled, his charm. He was irresistible . . . She just wouldn't let him go.

"What's made you decide to move? I thought you were happy."

"I am happy. Anyway, it was a sudden decision."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure." He nibbled her ear.

She was silent for a moment, then she said: "You haven't got anything bothering you, have you?"

She felt him grow rigid in her arms. Then he laughed, but she detected a note of uneasiness in his voice when he went on:

"Bothering me? Why should I have anything bothering me?"

"I don't know." She gave him a penetrating stare. "It's just a feeling. Sometimes you look on edge."

"It's because my heart is still playing me up a bit, I suppose."

If it was an appeal to her sympathy, it failed. She said: "Then there's Max. He's always wandering about; he's never still. Always coming and going, yet I never actually *hear* him enter the house. Why so much damned secrecy?"

"There's no secrecy. He's quiet, that's all, on my orders. I don't want noise, you know that. It upsets me, just as these scenes do, darling." He kissed her

again, long and lovingly this time, and her arms crept up around his neck.

"Oh, Gerry!" she whispered. "I do love you! Why do we have to quarrel?"

"Don't ask me," he said lightly, but if she could have seen the expression in his eyes at that moment, she would have been a very frightened girl indeed.

CHAPTER 11

"You're worrying too much, Gerald."

It was ten minutes later and Winchley lay on the bed in his room, watching the smoke from his cigarette spiralling up towards the ceiling.

Max was sprawled in the armchair beside the window. Big, square-shouldered, thick-lipped, he emanated strength. Nothing ever worried him. Gerald, on the other hand, was becoming a bundle of nerves. It wasn't like him; he must be ill, Max thought.

"Mary's a level-headed girl. If she says she saw something, then she did." Gerald's bronzed features were tightly set.

"So she saw a ghost?" Max spread his enormous hands. "Ghosts don't hurt you. As for that beam, things are always falling down in this house; you know that. Why, one wall of that tower has collapsed since we've been here. So what? It was an accident."

"She saw someone," Gerald persisted. "Who? If you must know, *I've* heard someone wandering about these past few days."

"I don't believe it. It's this house—"

"And I'll swear somebody has been turning over the things in the dressing table."

"Sonia—" Max's thick, ugly lips curled. "Look, you know what she's like. She's bold and brassy, and you're a good catch. Maybe she's trying to get a look

at your bankbook." He paused, then added: "Do you think she suspects?"

Gerald shook his head. "No. But supposing it's the others? They could be using Peacock. He could be dressing up and wandering about the house. Using the legend as a cover, so that if he's seen, we'll think the ghost is walking . . ."

Max shook his massive head. "No one can get into this place without me knowing about it," he declared. "Stop worrying. I tell you, it's not necessary. Now listen, I've got news. I've been busy—and I think I'm on to something at last."

Gerald brightened. His eyes gleamed.

"Seriously, Max?"

The big man grinned. "I'm practically sure of it. My little jaunts are beginning to pay off. So stop worrying about the others. They're thousands of miles away. They haven't got a clue."

But he was wrong. The danger was very near.

It was a time for celebration, reflected Kabri, but it would have been so much more enjoyable had he had the company of someone who derived as much pleasure from a glass of wine as he did himself. Peacock never touched anything stronger than orange juice. His lips curled in disgust. A kid's drink!

He refilled his glass from the bottle of champagne on the table and lit a fresh cigar. They sat in the small room at the back of the Fisherman's Arms; it was snug and comfortable, with prints of fishing craft and local beauty spots on the whitewashed walls. He guessed it was a cozy room in winter, with the fire

blazing up the chimney, the wind rattling the windows, and the thunder of the snow-capped waves on the nearby beach.

Peacock had said it was a "dull" room. He thought it should have contained prints of quite another nature—topless birds, for example. Peacock, Kabri reflected, had that kind of a mind. He would be glad when they parted company for good. Why did he have to dress up that way so that he looked like a damned girl? But didn't they all, these days? He supposed he was a square, but he had no use for this so-called "unisex" business.

It was well after closing time, but they were residents at the inn, so it didn't matter. The landlord had trusted them and left Kabri with the key to the cellar.

Trusted, Kabri, not Peacock. That was amusing really, reflected the stout man, resting his hands comfortably on his paunch. It was The Front that fooled them. The air of breeding, the silk shirts, the tailoring, the cigars, plus his very obvious Public School accent. Not that the old school would have wanted to know him now, he thought a trifle sadly.

It was, he supposed, luck or perhaps Gerald's stupidity. He and Peacock had hired a sleek-looking motor launch and had spent the afternoon lazing out in the bay. The sea had been calm, the boat rising and falling gently on the incoming tide, which suited Kabri, who in the normal way disliked anything connected with the sea. But, of course, he had known this day would be different when he had risen early that morning and strolled in the sunshine, past the fishermen's cottages, and gazed towards the house standing like

a sentinel on the cliffs. It was a feeling he had had in his bones before, and it was one that had rarely let him down in the past.

Oddly enough, he had always known that one day, somewhere, Gerald would try to doublecross them, and like a fool he had ignored the presentiment. Not Gerald, he had told himself; he wouldn't do that to one of his best friends. But of course Gerald had done it—and upset Kabri a great deal. It had upset him so much, in fact, that he had decided to kill Gerald, once he had recovered his expenses for the tiresome business of looking for him.

Oh yes, it had been a very tiresome business, and Gerald would have to pay dearly for it all.

Peacock sipped his orange juice and put down the magazine he had been studying.

He said, disgustedly: "I can't think why you have to keep guzzling drink."

"I can't see why you have to keep buying those sexy magazines," Kabri retorted.

"A feller's got to have something to think about."

"You never think about anything else. However, I suppose it wouldn't do for us all to be alike. Perhaps you're right, one shouldn't sit up late drinking too much wine when we have so much to do tomorrow. We shall leave it until the evening, naturally."

"If you say so." His companion shrugged his shoulders and looked sullen. Kabri thought that when he looked as he did now, his lips stretched tight, his eyes half-closed, his good looks disappeared and he had an air of viciousness.

Peacock drank the rest of his orange juice, noisily, then said: "Me, I don't mind when it is. The

morning would suit me; then we could be back in London by evening."

"At night no one will see us arrive. No one will see us leave." Grey cigar smoke trickled from the plump man's mouth.

They had been taking it in turns to study the old house through the binoculars. Yes, it was just what Gerald would have chosen. A big place, something to swank about. There was even a long, winding drive up to the imposing front porch. Gerald would love being the local squire. "Morning, sir." Touch of the cap . . .

Gerald Winchley.

Even that was a laugh, but it sounded cultured. It was a wonder he hadn't given himself a title. Sir Gerald Winchley.

Gerald, born Percy . . .

The sun had been blazing down when they were sitting on the beach. It was just after four o'clock and he was dying for a cup of tea, wishing they were back on that white-painted hotel with the iced drinks and the attentive waiters in Miami. It was then he had seen Max. There was no mistaking that hulking muscle-man. The matted hair on the chest, the scar on the right thigh from the knife in Tangiers, the slope of the shoulders, the long, gangling arms. It was Max all right, swimming strongly, emerging from one of the water-filled caves that lay at the foot of the cliffs beneath Seacliff House.

He had watched him haul himself into the rowing boat, floating just inside the cave. He had towelled himself down and sat there, sunning himself, smoking.

Peacock would have to take care of Max. He said he could, and Kabri hoped he was right. Max was big, strong as an ox. He could break a man's back like a matchstick.

He wondered if that was what had happened to the Weasel.

He shivered suddenly and ground out his cigar, messily.

"Let's turn in," he said. "It's going to be a long day tomorrow."

Some women go through life without ever finding love. They are the lonely ones. The unfortunate ones. Those destined by a cruel fate to be left "on the shelf." Love comes slowly, sometimes instantly. On a bus, in a train going home from the shop, the office, the factory. It strikes in the dance hall, the foyer of a cinema, in a cafe, on a beach. Everywhere and anywhere.

Eyes meet, and there is magic. The world is a new, different and wonderful place.

It happened to Mary when Peter took her in his arms. The spark had been there at the very beginning, on the beach, when she had wanted him to kiss her.

When would he kiss her, she wondered, as she breakfasted alone on the terrace.

She had slept well. Nothing had happened to disturb her. She was emotionally exhausted, she supposed, when she had gone up to her room, washed, changed into a nightdress, and bandaged her swollen ankle.

She was even too tired to be afraid, although she

had taken the precaution of locking the door and wedging a chair beneath the handle.

If anyone tried to come to her room that night she knew she would hear them.

Now a thousand and one questions raced through her brain as she sat gazing out over the weed-covered grounds.

Was Gerald genuinely concerned for her safety, or was it all a mask? Could the ghostly woman have been a man in disguise? Or had it been Sonia? But no, she would have recognized Sonia. And that face—!

But just what was going on in the old house—and, most important, how had Peter got in? And what had he been doing there, anyway, prowling around?

She hoped he would explain. But when would she see him again? "I'll be in touch" had been his last words. Did that mean tonight? Would he telephone her, or call for her in the car?

"Did you sleep well, Mary?" Sonia's voice came so suddenly, so unexpectedly, that she jumped.

"Oh! You startled me—"

"You *are* a nervous person, aren't you?" The other girl's eyebrows were arched amusedly.

Mary colored. "It was just that I was miles away—"

"Well, I'm sorry if I startled you. Heaven knows what you'll be like after a month here." She placed the coffee cup and plate on a silver tray; as always, she was well and expensively dressed. A purple dress today, and it suited her with her pale hair and fair coloring.

Sonia said: "I'm surprised at the fuss you kicked up last night—all that screaming. It's a wonder Gerald didn't have a heart attack."

"I was frightened," Mary said. "I'd been upstairs for some time, trapped by that beam. And I told you about the rats, didn't I? Where were you, incidently?"

"I was sunbathing, if you must know."

"And Gerald and Max?"

"Out on business, I don't know where. I don't share their confidence."

"I thought you did—"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Sonia said acidly, shooting her a sidelong glance.

"It wasn't supposed to mean anything. You are Gerald's housekeeper, after all. I thought he might have mentioned it."

"Well he didn't."

And that niggles you, thought Mary. You know he's attracted to you—or rather, you hope he is, but you dislike his secrecy. Aloud she said: "You don't like me, do you, Sonia?"

Sonia did not appear to have heard the question. She was gazing into space, her features taut and drawn. She was indeed worried. She wasn't at all happy at the way things had been going these past few days. Gerald had really fallen for her when they first met; she was certain of that; that the attraction had been mutual. There was something about him that struck a responsive chord in her own make-up. She sensed in a way that they were two of a kind. Deep, secretive, emotional, each out for all they could get and not too particular how they got it. There had been that instant rapport between them right from

the start. They had known it the second their eyes met.

They were so much alike. She knew they were—except for one difference. When she was attracted to a man she would do anything for him; she loved him with her whole being, and no one else had the slightest interest for her.

With Gerald it was different. He had a wandering eye. Every attractive girl made him turn and look after her. She had noticed that in London. He would take more than a second look. It was flattering perhaps for the girl who was the object of his interest, but not for the girl who happened to be with him.

Suddenly she started, aware that Mary had spoken to her.

"What did you say?"

"I said, 'You don't like me, do you?'" Mary repeated.

"You really have got too much imagination," Sonia jeered.

"I don't think I'm imagining it. And I think I know why."

"Really?" Sonia eyed her coolly. "Then perhaps you will enlighten me, Nurse."

"You think I'm interested in Gerald."

"I don't think. I know."

"Then you're mistaken."

"Do you expect me to believe that? You must think I'm soft in the head." Her lovely blue eyes were coldly contemptuous. "You've been throwing yourself at him ever since you came here—fainting fits, ghosts, anything to get his attention. And I've seen the way he looks at you. I know men, and I know Gerry better

than most. He's not adverse to a little flirting on the side—and you encourage him."

"What nonsense!" said Mary angrily. "You're out of your mind, Sonia. There's nothing whatever between us."

"Oh, come off it! I wasn't born yesterday. Why, even the first day you had him kissing you on the beach. I'll say this for you, you're a fast worker; you don't let the grass grow under your feet. Is that the usual drill when you're a private nuse—seek out the wealthy young bachelor, living alone for preference, and make up to him? Is that your angle? Trying to get yourself set up for life, marry well?"

"You know that isn't true!" Mary's eyes flashed. "It's a horrible thing to say! As for his kissing me on the beach, that was certainly none of my doing. I wasn't expecting it, and I certainly didn't want it."

"You didn't exactly put up a fight, did you? I saw you both. He was all over you."

"So spying on your employer is one of your duties as a housekeeper, then?"

Sonia flushed and her cheeks were taut with anger across the high cheekbones. "I was taking a stroll, I couldn't help seeing. You were both pretty blatant about it."

"You're quite wrong—"

"A man doesn't kiss a girl, particularly within an hour or two of meeting her—unless she's given him some kind of encouragement. You were laughing and flirting and—"

It was a stupid, useless argument, completely without foundation as far as Mary was concerned. She would have no more of it. She turned away, but Sonia

hadn't finished. She reached out and gripped Mary's shoulder, swinging her around.

"Now listen to me—" she shouted.

Mary's eyes were suddenly very cold.

"No, you listen to me. Don't ever lay hands on me again. And shut up. This has got to stop. It's all quite untrue and—"

"I'm warning you," Sonia said through her teeth. "Leave him alone. He's mine, do you understand? I won't let anybody take him away from me, least of all a mealy-mouthed little hussy like you."

Mary rose, stiff with fury. All she wanted to do now was to hit back at this girl, to avenge the insults that had been heaped on her. She spoke quickly, unthinkingly:

"We'll see about that. If you must know, Gerald *is* interested in me. He wants me to go abroad with him. Well, maybe I will. So think about *that!*"

She stalked away, angry now at having allowed her temper to get the better of her. It was stupid and undignified. But Sonia had infuriated her. She had wanted to convince her, quietly and firmly, that she wasn't interested in Gerald Winchley, that she wouldn't marry him if he was the last man in the world—assuming he asked her. Now she had spoiled it all.

The quarrel had got completely out of hand, like most quarrels, and Sonia was now her bitter enemy. Even more foolishly, she had given Sonia the impression that Gerald cared for her, and that she might even take him up on his offer to go abroad. In actual fact she couldn't care less about him, except as her patient. Her job was to see him through his con-

valescence, and that was all. No more. She wasn't interested in him as a man, and never had been. What an insanely jealous little idiot the girl was! They had both got into a temper and said things they probably didn't mean.

"I've a damn good mind to flirt with him, just to spite her," she told herself angrily.

But she knew it was the last thing she wanted to do. Sonia was crazy about Gerald; she probably couldn't help herself. Surely her anger should have been directed against him. He was deliberately playing havoc with Sonia's emotions. He wasn't the kind of man who would ever settle down with any girl.

Couldn't Sonia see that, or was she so completely blinded by her feelings towards him.

Or was it, perhaps, only his money she was interested in? It could well be. She was a beautiful girl, but Mary sensed that she was also hard and calculating.

"They met in a barn," she remembered Ada Lathom confiding to her on one occasion. "She's no fool, that one, I can tell you. I've met her kind before. Gold-diggers we used to call them. All these bold, brassy girls used to set their caps at the young gentlemen. They had money and position; that's all the girls were after—though the young masters usually had too much sense to marry them. A bit of fun, yes, but no more. Well, it stands to reason, doesn't it? You have to be born to that kind of life—running a big house, knowing all the social graces, and so on. Could *she?*"

"Probably," Mary had replied. "She's intelligent, something of an actress too, unless I'm wrong. And—"

she'd smiled as she spoke, "—she knows the way to a man's heart. After all, she's studied domestic science."

"That's not everything," Ada had sniffed.

Mary sighed. Well, whatever it was—love or money or both—it looked as though Sonia wouldn't get what she wanted, after all.

And, quite suddenly, she felt sorry for her.

CHAPTER 12

Mary did not see Sonia for the rest of the morning, for she was kept busy. She had barely given Gerald his weekly check-up, during which time he had tried to slip his arm around her, when the doctor called.

He was young and nervous. He confirmed Mary's diagnosis—that Gerald was well on the way to complete recovery, had a glass of sherry with them in the library, and hurried off to see a fisherman's wife who was expecting triplets. He had looked a little flustered and Mary had felt sorry for him.

Gerald had suggested that they go for a stroll on the beach, but Mary had politely declined, saying that the doctor had given her a great deal of paperwork to do. She had no intention of having a repeat performance on the beach, and in any case she wanted to be in when Peter rang.

His call came just after eleven. A little thrill ran through her at the sound of his voice. He sounded anxious. In her mind's eye she could see him standing in the cottage lounge, his good-looking face concerned, his gray eyes troubled.

"Is it safe to talk?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Good. Are you all right this morning?"

"Of course I am. And bless you for everything."

"And the ankle?"

"Still rather sore, I'm afraid."

"Of course, it was bound to be." He hesitated, then went on. "Look, will you be free this evening? I'd like to see you, but I'm not quite sure what time I can make it."

"Oh." She stared in disappointment at the opposite wall, her heart sinking. She had been so looking forward to seeing him. He must have sensed her disappointment, for he went on quickly: "I'll see you, if only for a few minutes, Mary. There's a lot I have to say."

"And a lot I want to know," she said softly, glancing quickly about her. But no one was within listening distance. "Will you phone me again, Peter?"

He seemed not to hear. He spoke hurriedly: "Sorry, I must go now. See you." Then the line went dead.

Mary replaced the telephone receiver and walked slowly from the library. Her feelings were mixed. She was thrilled that he had telephoned; thrilled that he seemed anxious about her.

Like Gerald, he was something of a mystery. She knew little about him, except that he hoped to break into the highly competitive Travel Agency business. The only thing she was quite certain about was that she had fallen in love with him.

And she believed that he was in love with her. Nothing had been said, but there had been the warm pressure of his hand on hers, the sidelong glance that spoke volumes, the warmth and tenderness of his embrace the previous evening. She did not understand yet why he should have been in the house. The questions she wanted to ask him ran through her mind again. How had he got into the house? How was he involved in the mystery that seemed to surround the

grim old mansion? What did he know about the supposed "ghost?" And what did he know about Gerald?

"I could go on asking questions all day and be no nearer the truth," she mused. "So I must try and curb my impatience until I see Peter. And please let it be soon."

At lunch Gerald seemed preoccupied with his thoughts. It was unlike him, for he was normally cheerful and talkative. Mary wondered if he knew of the quarrel between Sonia and herself. It could be. He certainly only flirted with her when they were alone together. Yet at the same time, she had the impression that he was excited about something. There was no evidence for it, unless his lack of appetite was an indication; it was simply a feeling she had. She remembered that there had been a slight increase in his blood pressure that morning.

As soon as the meal was over, Gerald excused himself and went upstairs.

Although Gerald had been lost in thought, Sonia had kept up a flow of conversation, directed mostly at Mary. To Mary's surprise, she had drawn her into conversation, almost as though nothing had happened between them. Mary was quick to respond, for she never bore malice. Sonia had obviously thought things over, she supposed, and now regretted her outburst of temper. Well, that was fair enough. Quarrels were best quickly forgotten; they could be wounding and sometimes destroying. Forgive and forget was Mary's motto.

When Mrs. Preston had taken away the dinner things Sonia said, "Mary, I wanted to speak to you. This is the first chance I've had since this morning."

She looked away for a moment, flushing. "I want to say I'm sorry."

Mary's smile was instant. "That's all right, Sonia. I think we both rather lost our tempers and said things we didn't mean. Don't let's think about it again."

Sonia said regretfully, "I got up in a bad temper. I had a headache, and I felt like hell. I shouldn't have taken it out on you, though. But well, Gerry does mean a great deal to me—and we do have an understanding."

"Please, don't mention it again," Mary begged.

Presently Sonia said she had better go and see how things were in the kitchen. Ada wanted the afternoon off, and she didn't want her to be late.

Mary went up to her room. She thought she would rest for an hour before taking a stroll in the grounds. So far she had not had time to explore the gardens at the front of the house and although they were overgrown with weeds she thought it would make an interesting walk, and she needed some fresh air.

Later she might take a stroll down the lane to see Freda Jackson. She knew that she would be welcome, and there was just the chance that she might see Peter there. Hardly had she settled herself than there came a quiet knock at the door.

She turned quickly. "Who is it?"

"It's only me," came Mrs. Preston's voice.

"Oh. Come in—"

The daily help poked her head around the door. She was dressed in her outdoor clothes, and was carrying her shopping bag. Her round, motherly face was wreathed in smiles.

"I'm just off home. I'm late as it is, but I had to come and tell you—" She lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Your young man's downstairs, wants to see you."

"Peter?" Mary's eyes sparkled.

Mrs. Preston nodded. "He wanted me to let you know on the quiet, so he didn't come to the front door."

"Thank you so much, Mrs. Preston. I'll come right away. Where is he?" She was already rummaging through her handbag for her lipstick.

"He's in the lodge. It's not occupied these days, so you'll have it to yourselves. You'll find it among the trees on the right-hand side of the drive. He said he couldn't stay long, so you'll have to hurry."

"I'm coming right now," said Mary, putting the finishing touches to her hair.

"I'll take you down the back staircase and through the old Servants' Hall," Mrs. Preston said, as she led the way along the corridor. "You'll find it a lot quicker, and you won't be seen by anyone. You don't want Mr. Gerald to call your for something, when your boy-friend's waiting, do you?" She winked significantly.

Mary followed her out through the back door and along a path that wound through the trees bordering the drive. Presently Mrs. Preston left her, taking the right fork which she said led down past Swallow Meadow and the old village school, to her little cottage.

"Give him a kiss for me," she called cheerfully before she disappeared. "Just keep on, and you'll come to the old lodge."

Two minutes later Mary reached the red brick-

built lodge with its tiny front garden and rusty wire fence surrounding it. It had latticed windows and a crooked chimney, and a water butt stood at one corner. It was an attractive old place, almost surrounded by rhododendron bushes in bloom, but it was badly in need of a coat of paint and some of the window frames were rotting away.

Mary's heart leapt as she saw Peter's tall, broad-shouldered figure standing in the little porch. At sight of her he started forward eagerly.

"It's wonderful to see you again," he said softly.

"And you, Peter," she replied, a little shyly.

"You grow lovelier every time I see you, Mary." And then she was close in the warmth of his arms and his lips were on hers. At last he released her but his arm still remained around her waist. She thrilled to the affection in his eyes.

"Let's go inside," he said. "You look pale—probably hurrying on that groggy ankle hasn't helped. I'm a fool to drag you all this way; I didn't think—"

The front door was already open and, noting her surprise, he gave a cheerful grin.

"I'm a wizard with locks," he said.

"I'm beginning to think you're a man of mystery," she said with mock solemnity. "That I know nothing at all about you. You seem able to get in and out of other people's houses without any trouble at all."

He laughed. "All right, I'll come clean. Mrs. Preston has the key. She's a friend of my aunt's. They always have tea together on a Wednesday and when she learned that I wanted to see you, without coming up to the house, she gave me the key."

"And is that how you obtained entry to Seacliff House?"

"Perhaps," he said lightly.

He opened a door on the right of the tiny hall and led into a small square room with pale pink wallpaper, a china cabinet, an old-fashioned settee, and two armchairs on either side of the tiny fireplace. The air smelt stale and he opened one of the windows.

"I like this," she said. "It's cozy."

"We have similar tastes. I used to play in this room when I was a child. That was in the days when the Rogers lived at the lodge. It's been empty for years now." He added: "They were a grand old couple. She used to make the most wonderful raspberry jam and he the best home-made wine in the village."

Then his smile faded. "You didn't let on about my finding you, did you?" he asked. "They believed your story that you'd managed to get free yourself?"

She nodded. "Gerald seemed very upset. I really can't believe that he had anything to do with it."

"And you've seen nothing of that mysterious woman?"

"No."

He was silent a moment, then he said: "Tell me more about her. Would you say she was tall?"

"Well . . . taller than I am, perhaps."

He appraised her thoughtfully. "About five-seven . . ."

She nodded. "I think so. But what is this all about, Peter? Do you think somebody in that house really tried to . . . to kill me?"

He nodded gravely. "I'm sure of it."

"But who? *Who?*"

"I'm not quite sure at the moment. It could be one of several people, in fact."

She stared in bewilderment. "But why should anyone want to kill me?"

"Somebody might have thought you were spying on them," he said carefully.

"Gerald? But—"

"He seems fond of you, is that what you were going to say? Well, I expect he is. Any man would be crazy not to be." He grinned again. "But he's not a man I would trust. In fact, I know he isn't."

"Have you had dealings with him, Peter? Is that how you know? Has he done you some harm?" She caught her breath and looked at him in sudden alarm. "You weren't in that house, looking for him—for revenge?"

He burst out laughing. His laugh was gay and lighthearted, but there was love and affection in his eyes.

"Heavens, no. What an imagination you have, darling!"

"But you *were* looking for something?"

"I'd rather not make a statement at this stage," he smiled.

"You wriggle like an eel. I can't pin you down, Peter," she exploded in exasperation. "Are you a policeman, by any chance?"

She thought he paused an instant before shaking his head.

"No. I can't tell you anything more than that about myself, I'm afraid."

"Is Gerald a crook?" she persisted.

"I think so—and a dangerous one. Though that doesn't necessarily mean that he would kill. Max might."

She stared at him in stunned silence.

"I can't believe it," she said at last. "I must confess I don't like Gerald as much as I did at first, and Max gives me the creeps. But it never crossed my mind that they could be crooks, or killers." Then she added: "What do you know about Sonia? Is she 'in' with them, do you think?"

"That I don't know—yet. I think it's true that he met her in a club in London. I don't see how he could have met her before; he'd been abroad for several years. But he has a bad reputation with women. She probably didn't suspect what she was letting herself in for. I want you to leave that house right away, Mary."

She stared at him incredulously. "Are you saying that Gerald is some kind of . . . monster?"

"No, nothing of the kind. But he is a womanizer and I don't like the idea of you being there with him."

"But there's another reason, isn't there?" she persisted. "You tell me some things, but keep others back. You say you're not a policeman, and yet you seem to know a great deal about these people. Just *why* don't you want me to stay here?"

He was silent for a moment, staring at her, then he said slowly, "Because, very soon, there's going to be trouble at Seacliff. Big trouble. And if you're there, you may get involved. You may even get hurt."

"I can look after myself," she said steadily.

"You couldn't yesterday," he reminded her.

"Because I wasn't expecting trouble. Now that

I've been warned, I shall be on my guard. Don't you see, Peter, it's no good looking at me like that—I just can't leave at a moment's notice. I'm there to look after a patient. I'm a nurse. In any case, I would have to contact the doctor first, and he's in London. Secondly I'd have to give my reasons, and what could I say? Just that you think the house is full of crooks and that there's going to be trouble. He would think I'd gone round the twist, and no wonder."

"You can be very stubborn," he said.

"I don't want to be made to look a fool."

"I wouldn't do that to you, Mary," he said quietly.

"No, I didn't mean that! But, well, *can* I leave just like that? It wouldn't do my profession as a nurse much good."

"But it's possible someone did try to kill you yesterday," he said.

"Can I tell that to Dr. Framling? That the house is haunted, that the ghost attacked me—or rather, led me into a trap? Please, Peter, be reasonable! You must have very good reasons for your suspicions, I know, but if that's the case, why can't you tell me more?"

"Because I've told you too much already," he said shortly. "I didn't intend to. I don't know the whole story myself. It's like a jigsaw puzzle; there're bits and pieces missing. When I can fit it all together to make a complete picture . . . That's why I was there, trying to dig up the truth to find out what's going on. And I don't want them to suspect anything about me, because if they did they would suspect you knew, and they'd make you talk. And that would

blow the whole thing sky-high. What I *am* sure about is that there's going to be trouble any day now."

"Why don't you let me help you?" she said suddenly. "I'm in the house all the time. Tell me what you're looking for, what you want to know."

"Nothing doing," he said firmly. "But you *can* do something for me. You can ring aunt every morning and inquire about her health. You can say you know she's unwell, and that way I'll know you are all right. Will you do that?"

"Yes, if you're that worried."

"Of course I'm worried, Mary. Darling, haven't you realized—do I have to spell it out for you? I'm crazy about you. I love you."

CHAPTER 13

Mary's head was in a whirl when, a little later, she made her way back through the trees towards the house. Her own suspicions that there was some mystery at Seacliff House had been proved correct.

Peter had said that Gerald Winchley was a criminal, and assuming he was right, then so was Max. They were involved in some dark intrigue, but just what it was she didn't know. Peter might deny that he was a policeman, but he was certainly something of the kind, and she wondered exactly what. He obviously expected trouble, though he hadn't explained what sort of trouble. All that was clear in her mind was the fact that he loved her—and in the few minutes they had had together before he left, he had made that abundantly clear.

And there was Sonia—Sonia, who might or might not have tried to kill her, or at least to injure her, because of her insane jealousy over Gerald. Poor Sonia, did she have any idea that Gerald was a crook? Mary would have liked to have warned her, but she knew that was impossible because if she did so, Sonia would naturally want to know where she had obtained her information. She couldn't involve Peter, endanger his plan, perhaps even his life.

She let herself in and crossed the kitchen. It was very quiet, and she wondered where Ada was, then

remembered that Sonia had told her she was taking the afternoon off.

She glanced at her wristwatch. Heavens, it was four o'clock. She had been with Peter for nearly two hours. How quickly the time had passed. But it had been wonderful, even if she was more confused now than she had been when she left.

Confused, but very happy.

She hoped Gerald hadn't been asking for her while she had been gone. It was certainly most unprofessional of her to have absented herself all this time, without leaving word where she was.

She swung her bag happily as she entered the narrow passage and made her way towards the hall. Her handbag was heavier than usual, for Peter had slipped a small revolver into it before she left.

She had protested. "But . . . but I wouldn't know how to use it, Peter!"

"No matter," he said grimly. "I want you to take it. If necessary, you can go through all the motions. And don't forget, telephone Aunt Freda every morning, or I shall be worried sick about you."

He was worrying unnecessarily, she thought, and if anything alarming did happen, she could lock her door or run from the house down to the safety of his aunt's cottage.

She entered the main hall and as she did so, Sonia appeared on the landing above.

"Mary, where have you been?" Her voice was harsh; she looked agitated.

Mary felt a quick stab of fear. "What's the matter, Sonia? What's wrong?"

"It's Gerry—"

Mary took the stairs at a run, reaching the landing breathless with haste and anxiety. Sonia's face was pale; her eyes looked a little glazed, almost as though she had been drinking.

"Sonia, what is it? Has he had another heart attack?"

"I think so . . . Please hurry!"

Mary turned along the landing towards Gerald's room, but Sonia shook her head and began to hurry up the next flight of stairs to the floor above. She glanced quickly over her shoulder.

"Up here—"

"But—" Mary paused.

"He was worried about you." Her voice was savage. "He heard noises up here, thought you were in some kind of trouble again. He insisted on climbing all those stairs—"

"Stairs? What stairs?" Mary spoke sharply.

"Up into the old tower. I told him not to go, but he would do so. He was running . . . in his condition!" Her voice broke. "Damn you, this is all your fault!" she sobbed.

Mary felt a spasm of guilt at the words, knowing that they could very well be true. She should not have absented herself from the house for so long, leaving no word.

Sonia was running along the narrow, winding passage, her heels click-clacking on the bare floorboards. Mary followed her, averting her eyes from the heavy, blackened beam which still lay on the floor; the beam that had trapped, and could have killed, her. She choked down a feeling of fear, remembering the rats.

Sonia jerked her head around, ensuring that Mary was still behind her.

"Quick! We may be too late—" she panted.

She was hurrying up the flight of narrow stairs, her feet drumming on the treads. Once she almost fell; she seemed hysterical. If Gerald had really had a heart attack, up there, there was every reason for her panic, Mary thought.

Overhead the sky was gray and overcast. It was starting to rain again and she could hear the distant rumble of thunder. She wondered vaguely why every day seemed to end in a storm.

The wind slashed sharply at her face as she ran out into the tower.

"Where is he—?" she began, then stopped. There was no sign of Gerald. Only then did she realize that Sonia had trapped her.

The next moment Sonia had leapt at her, her face contorted with hatred. Mary could distinctly smell brandy on her breath and knew that the girl must have been drinking heavily, drinking and brooding.

"It's all your fault!" she shouted. "All your fault! He loved me until you came—" The rest of her words were lost in the violent clap of thunder that seemed to split the sky asunder.

The rain was lashing down now as the two girls struggled together. Mary tried to wrench herself free, but her foot slipped on the wet floorboards and she fell to her knees. Instantly Sonia shifted her grip, grabbed her about the shoulders and began dragging her towards the tower wall.

"You think you've got him, don't you?" Her voice

was high-pitched, yet at the same time it was slightly slurred. "But you never made a bigger mistake. He's mine, I tell you! You shan't come between us."

She seemed possessed of almost maniacal strength as she continued to drag Mary across the wet, slippery floorboards. Her hair was plastered to her skull and her scarlet lips were twisted back over her teeth. Mary, shaken with horror, could scarcely believe this was the cool, poised Sonia she knew; she could only imagine that something had snapped in her brain, had driven her to the edge of madness.

There was a terrible fear in Mary's heart as she felt herself being dragged along. There was nothing she could grasp, nothing she could hold on to. If only she could reach the gun! But during the struggle the handbag had been wrenched from her grasp and was now lying in a far corner.

Sonia had half-lifted her now, she could feel the wall of the turret against her back. She could see the lightning-torn sky, hear the thunder of the waves beneath. The pounding rain seemed to become more violent, drumming on her upturned face.

She was going over—

Sonia's hate-filled face was close to her own, twisted into a mask of triumph, the eyes wide, blank, crazed.

Gasping with terror, Mary summoned every ounce of strength she possessed. She knew that if she couldn't shake off her assailant now, it would be too late. Another moment and she would be flung over the edge of the wall.

Afterwards she had no clear recollection of how she did it. She was in a frenzy of fear, and that fear

must have given her the strength to equal Sonia's. For suddenly she straightened her back and wrenched herself free, falling sideways as she did so.

The movement took Sonia completely by surprise. She felt herself flung forward, off-balance, but now she was grasping empty air. She screamed and tried to pull herself back. Instinctively, from where she lay, Mary thrust up a desperate hand to help her, but she was too late. The stone wall crumbled away and Sonia went hurtling down towards the rocks, a thin despairing cry echoing up from below.

Shivering, soaked to the skin, the rain beating down on her head and face, Mary crawled away from the crumbling wall. She got to her feet and leaned over the parapet, and the wind tore at her, threatening to hurl her after the unfortunate Sonia.

Oh God, she whispered through chattering teeth. Then she stumbled towards the narrow staircase—straight into the arms of the two men coming up.

"Gerald!" she sobbed. "Sonia—she tried to kill me. The wall gave way—she fell . . ."

Winchley shot Max a quick glance in which Mary seemed to see shock and then a peculiar elation. She couldn't be sure, for nothing was registering with her at the moment except the horror of Sonia's death. A mist swirled before her eyes and as from afar she heard Gerald whispering words of comfort.

"Don't think about it, my dear. Max, take her down to her room."

Mary raised no protest as the huge, gorilla-like arms lifted her. Max moved quickly, even lithely for so heavy a man. He carried her as her father had done

when she was a child, tired after a happy and exciting day . . .

In no time at all she was lying on her bed. Gerald was there a moment later, holding a glass to her lips and her teeth chattered against the rim. The liquid was fiery, burning down into her stomach, but it steadied her and presently she was able to sit up.

"I'll get you some hot milk, Mary," Gerald said. "While I'm gone you'd better get out of those wet things."

When he returned she was calmer, sitting up in a bed jacket and smoking a cigarette—the first time he had seen her smoke. She was still very pale, but the shivering had ceased. She looked very lovely with her raven black, still damp hair cascading down the side of her cheeks, Gerald thought; child-like, too, with her wide, innocent eyes.

He gave her the milk and she sipped it gratefully. A few minutes later she put down the empty glass.

"Do you feel better now?" he asked.

"Yes." Her eyes were still dark with memory. "But you shouldn't be worrying about me. Sonia—"

"I'm afraid there is nothing we can do for Sonia," he said quietly.

"You shouldn't be worrying at all," she said in concern. "All this is very bad for you—"

"How sweet you are, Mary!" he said, and his hand rested for a brief moment on her own. "After that terrifying experience your real concern is still for your . . . patient. But I'm quite well, I assure you. All I feel is horror at what has happened, and a tremendous relief that you weren't harmed. I still

can't believe it. What really happened? What were you both doing up there? Why did she try to kill you?"

In a faltering voice Mary told him what had happened.

"She didn't seem her normal self," she added. "Her eyes were glassy, as though she had been drinking, or taking some kind of drug. But there was the smell of brandy on her breath, so it must have been the drink. She seemed as though she'd undergone some sort of shock—"

Gerald lit a cigarette, holding it between his slim, elegant fingers. His face was worried. He said slowly, "But why should she trick you into going into the tower? What could have been her motive?" He looked steadily at her. "You're a nurse, you should know. Did she have some kind of mental breakdown, do you think?"

Mary colored. There was no point in lying. The truth would have to come out eventually.

"She was fond of you—"

He looked startled. "She was? Well I'm damned! I never dreamed."

Mary thought uneasily, fear nagging at her mind, Why is he lying? Why pretend this surprise? He must have known she was in love with him. She told me they had an—understanding . . .

"I liked her well enough," Gerald went on. "We got on well, and of course, she ran the house perfectly. I had no complaints in that direction. But are you suggesting she'd fallen in love with me, Mary?"

"You didn't know?" She met his gaze steadily.

"Of course not! But I still don't understand why she should have attacked you."

"She was jealous of me. She's been jealous ever since I arrived. She thought I was coming between you both—"

"But this is dreadful! I never gave her the slightest encouragement."

You're lying, thought Mary. And something is bothering you. Is it because you don't want to be involved? Or is it because of what may come out at the inquest? Shall I tell you that I know you're lying? But what good will that do now? It might bring on a heart attack . . .

The thoughts ran crazily through her mind. No, she must avoid open conflict at the moment; she must have time to think. And she couldn't think straight right now; her head was in a whirl, everything had happened so quickly. And, she told herself, Peter warned me that he is dangerous. So I must do nothing to alarm him, arouse his suspicions. I must play along with him.

He pressed her hand again.

"This really is most distressing, Mary. I liked Sonia, but I honestly never thought about her in that way. Perhaps my real feelings for you did show through sometimes—but enough of that now," he added hurriedly, as he felt her fingers withdraw from his. He paused, lost in thought for a moment, then said, "The problem is to know exactly what to do."

"The police will have to be informed at once," Mary said.

"Is that wise?"

She looked at him in astonishment. "What do you mean? Of course they must be told. I don't think I understand . . ." She felt fear beginning to stir

again at the pit of her stomach. He was smiling, but somehow the smile failed to reach his eyes.

"I was thinking of you, Mary. The police may not believe your story. *I* do, of course," he went on quickly, "but the police have such dreadfully suspicious minds."

"I still don't understand. Why should they suspect?"

"They may not believe that it was an accident. They have only your word for what happened."

"Why should they think I'm lying?"

"Well, they may come to the conclusion that it was you who tried to kill Sonia. That you were quarrelling over me—"

"But that's not true. You know it's not true." Her heart was thudding uncomfortably now, and she looked at him with fear in her eyes. "I'm not in love with you!"

"They don't know that."

"You only have to tell them."

"Tell them what?"

"That there never has been anything between us. Max must know that."

"Max is an old friend, and will support anything I say. I do love you, Mary, he knows that. I should have to tell the truth and say so to the police. Naturally, they would draw their own conclusions."

"Ada and Mrs. Preston know there's nothing between us."

"What do they know? Their life is downstairs. What do they know about what goes on between us? Would you be likely to confide in the servants?"

She stared at him in growing horror. It was on the

tip of her tongue to say that Ada Lathom and Mrs. Preston knew more than he thought about his relationship with Sonia, but something held her back. She didn't want anything to happen to them—and Peter had told her that Gerald was dangerous. She was beginning to see now that he could be right.

"Another thing," he said casually. "It won't look so good if I tell the police that you carry a gun in your handbag, will it?" His voice hardened. "Incidentally, why do you? It's hardly a nurse's standard equipment, surely? Who are you?"

Mary was trying desperately to think of an answer. She daren't tell him that Peter had given her the gun, and for a reason.

"Because I was frightened," she found herself saying.

"Frightened?"

"I was coming to a lonely old house," she said. "I didn't know what you would be like. What anybody here would be like. I had a patient once before—he . . . he went out of his mind and—"

It sounded completely unconvincing and she knew it. A faint smile curved his lips.

"I see. So you carry a gun to shoot your patients with if they happen to go off their heads. Come, Mary, you can hardly expect me to believe that, can you?"

"You must believe what you like," she retorted.

"Very well, I'll say no more for the present. But the police might not be so susceptible." He turned sharply as the door opened and Max lumbered in. He wore a black, transparent raincoat that gleamed wetly; the rain was spilling down it and forming a pool on the floor.

"You've found her?"

"On the rocks. Her neck's broken."

Mary shuddered.

Max said, "Shall I throw her body in the sea?"

"No . . . it might be washed up on the beach. We don't want the police poking around here." He turned back to Mary. "I'm afraid it looks bad for you, Mary. But we'll help you, Max and I."

"Help me?" she stammered.

"We'll conceal the body for the time being, until we can get things sorted out. In any case, you're in no fit state at the moment to be interviewed by the police. I think we should give you a little something to make you sleep for a while." He glanced at Max. "You've got it?"

Mary's eyes dilated as the big man came forward, and she saw a hypodermic syringe in his hand.

"No—" she shouted.

"You do it, Max," Gerald said softly, averting his gaze. "I do hate to see those needles going in. It makes me feel quite ill."

CHAPTER 14

"What funny people," grinned Peacock. "A storm like this, and they leave the back door open."

"The world's full of funny people," grunted Kabri.

"Anyone could walk in." Peacock's face was wreathed in a smile. "Villains, all kinds of horrible people . . ."

"It does make you think," said Kabri, slowly shaking his head. "Of course, we do know the cook isn't at home; we saw her catching the bus to go into town."

"So that only leaves the housekeeper, that pretty little nurse, and our two friends—"

"That's right." Kabri nodded gravely and stared down the long lounge. " I think they'll be surprised to see us after all this time."

Peacock gave a baleful grin.

"Surprise isn't the word for it. I don't expect they'll feel like offering a drink, so I'll help myself." Then he scowled irritably. "There's no orange juice—damned people aren't even civilized!"

He slumped down in an armchair, a disgruntled expression on his face. "Not very considerate, are they, towards their guests?"

"Shut up. We don't want them to know we're here," Kabri scowled. "Just keep quiet and wait. Whatever they're doing they'll be bound to show up in a minute."

He sat down on a chair facing the door. He was calm and relaxed, and might well have been sitting in the lounge of an inn or a club, there was so little expression on his round, fleshy face.

He had waited a long time. He could afford to wait a little longer.

He sat there, looking almost sleepy-eyed, but his index finger was crooked carelessly around the squat revolver in his plump fist.

"You can pour me a glass of sherry," he said. "We don't have to sit here gasping for a drink while we wait for them."

Gerald Winchley was grinning as he quietly closed the door behind Mary, now lying in a drugged stupor on the bed.

He had always prided himself on his quick wits and they hadn't failed him this time.

That crazy little fool, Sonia! Of course he had known that she was insanely jealous, but he hadn't expected her to carry things this far. They had had another quarrel that very afternoon, and as soon as he had gone up to his room to rest she had stormed in again. It was obvious she had filled in the interim with some heavy drinking; her eyes were glazed and her voice slurred.

"Why don't you leave the bottle alone?" he growled. "You know damn well that once you start you can't stop. I told you to lay off it if you wanted to stay here."

"It's all your fault. You drive me to drink."

"Well, you know what you can do," he said callously. "If you don't like it here any more, you can get

out. I've told you once, and I'm telling you again. What's wrong this time?"

"You know damned well what's wrong. You and that girl—"

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, I thought that was all over and done with. I've told you where we stand. I'm not interested in her. Why do you keep on harping about it? And the drink makes you worse. It's becoming an obsession with you, this Mary business, I mean—"

"I can't go on," she muttered. "It's no good. It's like I said, you're tiring of me. I know you are."

"I'll let you have it straight, then. All right, so I'm getting tired of these scenes. You're becoming a drag, my dear Sonia."

"You hardly spoke to me at lunch today—"

"I had a lot to think about."

"You're deliberately trying to pick a quarrel with me, force me to leave. You're trying to shut me out of your life."

"For God's sake, pull yourself together! What's the matter with you?"

"I want us to go away now," she said. "Leave this rotten place; it's only brought us unhappiness. We don't have to stay here. You only have to pick up the phone and book a couple of seats on a flight, and we could be off. By tonight we could be in Paris."

"I don't want to go to Paris."

"Well, anywhere, then."

"I don't want to go anywhere."

"But you'd go if *she* wanted to!" she snapped.

"Don't talk like a fool. I've told you, I've got busi-

ness to attend to. Leaving here at the moment is out of the question. With you, Mary, anyone—" His voice had become a snarl. "Now will you get out and leave me in peace?"

"I nursed you when you were sick," she sobbed.

"And you'll have me in my box if you keep harping on the same groove," he said crudely.

"You've only yourself to blame."

He breathed heavily in exasperation. Why did she have to keep on so? It was the drink, he supposed; she'd never been able to take it. Once she'd got the bit between her teeth she wouldn't let go. She just kept on, going over the same ground. Nothing penetrated, nothing sank in.

"All right, I'm to blame," he said. "Now get out."

"So you admit it?"

"I'll admit anything—"

"What are you going to do about it, then? You admit I'm right, that you're interested in her."

"If you must know, I'm crazy about her—and sick and tired of you," he said brutally. "Sick of you, do you hear? Now will you give it a rest and go and lie down or something? Go and cool off—"

"I've been everything to you!" she panted. "Everything!"

"Go and look at yourself in the mirror," he said. "You're a mess. Go on, take a look! That's what all this is doing to you. Then you ask me why I fancy her? Anyone with any sense could give you a dozen reasons. She's as different from you as chalk from cheese. She doesn't blow her top. She doesn't booze. She's everything you're not. And who the hell *do* you

think you are, anyway? The way you carry on, people would think we were married. Get out. Get out of my sight, out of my life. I never want to see you again."

His chest was heaving now and sweat was glistening on his face. He began to feel ill, a pain stabbing his chest.

That stupid bitch! She'd kill him.

She turned and ran out of the room, the tears streaming down her face. Gerald swallowed two of his pills and slumped down on the bed. Women! He'd had his fill of them. Well, it was over now. It had had to come sooner or later, so it might just as well be now. These scenes weren't good for him. Or for Sonia, for that matter. Look what they were doing to her. She was half-drunk, and insane with jealousy.

He lay on the bed and as the pain subsided he lit another cigarette. Mary, he thought, now there was a real girl for you. Soft, sweet, yet with a strain of practicality about her. Intelligent, sympathetic, perceptive—perhaps a little too perceptive in some ways—and pretty. He liked them pretty, small and shapely. Yes, he thought they would get on fine together once Sonia was out of the way. Ada Lathom could run the place from now on until he left. It wouldn't be for long.

He rubbed his chin reflectively.

But would Sonia go? And if she did go, how much was it going to cost him?

She hadn't done badly out of him while she'd been here. No one could say he wasn't generous. Some said he was over-generous and certainly money had a way of slipping through his fingers. Well, he couldn't help

his nature; that was the way he'd been born. Easy come, easy go, except that he was getting pretty low, financially, now.

Never mind, the coffers would soon be full again. He had always been lucky . . .

He must have dozed off then, for the next he knew Max was shaking him awake.

"What's the matter?" He sat up, sleepily rubbing his eyes.

"It's Sonia."

"What about her? Has she gone?"

"She and Mary are on the tower—fighting like a couple of wildcats."

"Good God!"

Gerald had leapt off the bed. "She's been hitting the bottle; it sounds as though it's turned her brain. Get a hypodermic from my case, Max. We'll probably have to give her something to cool her off, or we'll find ourselves with the law at the front door."

They went out of the room and towards the tower at a run.

Sonia's death had been less of a shock than a relief. It had conveniently solved a lot of problems, for both of them. But Mary's talk of bringing in the police had alarmed him. He didn't want the police nosing around; one thing would lead to another, questions would be asked . . . They might even suspect that *he* had killed her—a case of "off with the old love, on with the new."

And if they found out he was living there under an assumed name—

No, the police were out. He had to stop Mary somehow . . .

Now, as they left Mary's room, Gerald realized that Max was speaking.

"What did you say?" His voice was irritable; there was so much to do, to think about.

"When she comes round . . . What are we going to do about her?"

"We'll worry about that later. What did you do with Sonia?"

"I hid her in the cave. She'll be safe enough there."

Gerald nodded. "Good. Nobody will find her there —and I don't think it's likely she'll be missed. She's got nobody, as far as I know."

"What about the cook and Mrs. Preston? They'll think it strange she isn't here, won't they?"

"I'll tell them she quit. They won't be so surprised —or bothered. She didn't get on very well with either of them. And Mary won't say anything, if she knows what's good for her. We'll have to keep her a prisoner, naturally, until we're ready to leave."

They had reached the hall. Max said: "Let's have a drink before we go down below. I can do with one."

"So can I. This affair has left a nasty taste in my mouth."

They went into the lounge, and it was then they saw the two men sitting there, with levelled guns.

"Well, well, if it isn't Gerald Winchley and his butler," grinned Peacock. "What a small world it is, to be sure!"

CHAPTER 15

Gerald had turned very pale. His mouth was suddenly dry. They were the last people he had expected to see, these two men from the past. He had been so sure they would not find him. The Weasel had sworn he hadn't told them where he was to be found. And Weasel wouldn't have lied, not then, when Max was giving him the full treatment. He had died still swearing that he hadn't lied.

Gerald had believed him.

Now he said hoarsely: "How did you know?"

"The Weasel told us you were somewhere in the district. We started from there. Have you seen him?"

"No," Gerald stammered, with an uneasy sidelong glance at Peacock. He had always been afraid of the Weasel's brother, and he was afraid of him now. It would be fatal to let him know what had happened to the Weasel.

"You're lying." Peacock's face was cruel, his dark eyes smouldering. "Where is he?"

"I told you, I don't know. I haven't seen him; I didn't even know he was in the district."

"You'll tell me the truth," gritted Peacock. "No lies, no smooth talk, Percy boy. Just the truth. But you don't need to tell me that; it's written all over your face. He's dead, isn't he?"

He turned and looked at Max. "And I'll bet you killed him."

The big man stared back. He was not one to be easily frightened. His expression was impassive.

"You're wrong, Peacock. Like Gerald said, we haven't seen your brother."

Peacock gave a sneering laugh. "Do you really expect me to believe that?"

The other shrugged his shoulders. He looked bored. He knew that would infuriate Peacock. He would come closer . . . Already the color was draining from his face; his eyes were like black hollows punched in the taut, strained features. Just a little nearer—that was all Max wanted.

"Hold it, Peacock." Kabri had risen to his feet. The portly little man had not relaxed his hold on his own gun. He knew how dangerous Max could be.

"I haven't started yet," Peacock said thickly.

"I said, hold it." Kabri's voice was sharp and authoritative. "We've got business to attend to first." His eyes switched to Winchley. "Where's the loot?"

"You must be joking," Gerald said. "That was six months ago. A long time—"

Kabri's eyes never left his face. He was unsmiling.

"It was a lot of money. Even you couldn't get through it in that time," he said slowly. "We were in business together; we were well-organized. We had the right contacts. We had the right customers. Industrial espionage is where the money is made these days. And you ran out with the lot. We followed you and Max from the States, to the Middle East, and finally here. You haven't stayed long anywhere, because you guessed we wouldn't be far behind. You haven't had time to spend it."

Gerald shrugged his shoulders. Some of the color had come back into his cheeks.

"It costs money to keep on the move, Kabri, you know that. As for this place, it wasn't cheap."

"It won't be cheap to get us off your back, either," the portly little man said evenly. "And then there's Rita—"

"Rita? What's she got to do with it?"

"She was a good girl until she got mixed up with you. A real good girl. No slut. She thought you were on the level. You and your smooth talk. You told her you were going to marry her. I guess that's what you told all the others, too, eh? But they're no concern of mine. I'm only interested in what you did to Rita."

He went on bleakly: "You've got to pay for that. She's in a mental home—a complete breakdown. She'll never get over what you did to her. The doctor says it may take years before she's normal again—mentally. She's locked up in her own mind, did you know that? In another world. Shock, they say, did something to her brain."

His voice rose: "You listening, Gerald—Percy, I should say. That's what you did to Rita, put her in a mental home. You took her from me; it didn't matter that I was your friend, that we'd started this racket together, had built it up from peanuts. Nothing mattered to you, except to get what you wanted. And you wanted Rita—then, for a while. Well, the business can go on, we can do without you. We can do without Max. We can recruit more brains, more brawn. Like I said, industrial espionage is big money. But we can't get another Rita. She's never going to be the same.

And you've got to pay. Private nursing homes—the best—come expensive; *very* expensive."

"I didn't know what had happened to her," Gerald muttered. "If I had, of course I'd have done something about it. I mean, I would have sent her some of the money—"

"Money!" shouted Kabri. "What good is money to her? She's a cabbage! You hear me? A cabbage. And now you're going to foot the bill. Where's the rest of the money from the Boston job?"

"Gone. Every penny," spat Gerald. "I've told you. And then too, I bought this place. I figured it was safe here. I never dreamed you'd trace us to England."

Suddenly it happened.

Max had been looking bored, contemptuous, unafraid. As he had expected, this had incensed Peacock. He came closer, just close enough.

And then Max sprang. It was a panther-like spring, and well-timed. His ham-like fist slammed out, his intention being to send Peacock skittling backwards into the portly Kabri, taking them both by surprise.

But it didn't come off. Peacock knew Max's strength. He never took any chances. He fired a split second before the blow aimed at his wrist had landed. He fired twice.

The big man stopped dead in his tracks. He teetered on his heels like a massive oak tree, an expression of utter incredulity on his face. Then he pitched to the floor with a crash that shook the room.

"I never did like big men," The Peacock said.

"Now you're all alone, Percy," Kabri said softly. "And you had better start singing."

Mrs. Freda Jackson's normally cheerful, placid face was worried as she stood in the oak-beamed lounge of the cottage and peered through the latticed window. On a particularly fine day she was just able to see the old house on the cliff, but now it was shrouded in wraiths of sea mist and seemed somehow more sinister and evil than ever.

"Really, Peter," she said, "I think you must have taken leave of your senses."

"Mary's a very stubborn girl."

"Then you should have picked her up, flung her over your shoulder and carried her away from that dreadful place."

He grinned despite his uneasiness and ran his hand through his unruly fair hair.

"You've read too many old-fashioned novels, Aunt. And she would probably have slapped my face, anyway."

"Rubbish!" she exclaimed sharply. "Girls like their men-folk to be tough. You should never have agreed to let her stay there; you must go and get her at once!" She gave him a long, appraising look. "You tell me now that you're some kind of policeman and that the place is swarming with criminals. It's a wonder we haven't all been murdered in our beds. How could you be so deceitful, Peter? I thought you had a nice quiet little job in the Ministry, filing away little personal notes from the Prime Minister, spending your week-ends here, painting the chalet—which you've barely touched this time—to take your mind off the dullness of your job, you said. And now I suspect your little weekend case carried not paints and brushes but false

beards, hand grenades and probably a bottle of that frightful nerve gas . . ."

He grinned again, but there was anxiety in his eyes. He agreed with his aunt that he should never have left Mary at Seacliff House.

"You seem to have read the oddest kind of books, Aunt, but you're quite right. I've a hunch the pace is quickening, and I ought to do something about it. If anything happened to Mary—"

"I thought so!" she said triumphantly. "I thought you had fallen for her the morning you appeared at breakfast, smiling like a Cheshire cat. In the normal way you're moody and grumpy and like a bear with a sore head first thing in the morning."

"Am I? I didn't know. I'm sorry, Aunt."

"No need to apologize. Your Uncle Jim was just the same, and I'm used to it. But I mustn't stand here babbling to you. Be off with you and bring Mary back here at once, while Basil and I get the spare room ready."

Basil was her disdainful black cat, who followed her everywhere and seemed to enjoy watching people work.

It was raining again when Peter left the house and cut across the fields towards the coast, though the worst of the storm was over. Minutes later he was hurrying down the narrow path that wound among the rocks. The wind was stronger, the sea very rough, smashing against the rocks and fine spray pricked his face.

Slowly and carefully he clambered among the rocks until he came to a narrow opening—one he had discovered years ago, as a child. The cave itself was

flooded at high tide, but entry was possible along a narrow ledge of rock which ran beside the water. Presently it widened and rose steeply until at last he paused before what appeared to be a solid wall of rock.

He thrust his shoulder against it and it slid slowly to one side on well-oiled hinges.

He stepped cautiously inside and switched on his pocket torch. He was in a large natural cavern at the far end of which were steps roughly hewn out of the rock. In the olden days the house had been the headquarters of smugglers and the cavern used as a store, as it was now. There were two or three large crates that had not been there on a previous visit. However, this was no time to examine them, and in any case he had a shrewd suspicion of the nature of their contents.

He stood there a moment, listening. He had no wish to be surprised by the burly Max, who spent most of his time down here. Then he cat-footed up the stone steps until he reached the small square landing.

His eyes hardened as the circle of light came to rest on a body lying there. For one dreadful second he thought he had arrived too late; that it was Mary lying there, her sightless eyes gazing at the cave roof. Then he saw that it was Sonia. A quick examination revealed that her neck was broken, and her body was covered with bruises.

"Poor kid."

His mouth tight, he quietly opened the narrow wooden door and stepped into the cellar beyond. It was filled with old junk, mostly broken furniture and old tea chests used by removal men. There was a heap of old newspapers and magazines, a bath filled with

odds and ends, a bedside lamp and some rusty bedsprings.

He climbed a second flight of steps and went quietly into the narrow corridor which led from the old Servants' Hall, now a crumbling ruin. He followed the winding passage until he came at last to the entrance hall, with its gray stone walls and lofty, church-like ceiling.

He paused, listening again. The door of the lounge was ajar, and a narrow edge of light streamed out into the hall. He heard the murmur of voices. Someone was laughing mockingly. Someone was quietly sobbing.

CHAPTER 16

Terror filled Mary's eyes as she came round and stared dazedly into the darkness of her room. It was the wind and the rain that brought memory flooding back; the rain was lashing at the window frames and the wind was moaning about the walls.

She closed her eyes, but was unable to shut out the memory of Sonia's body hurtling downwards, her thin, wailing cry.

It had been an accident. She had been trying to ward off the other girl's murderous attack. How could that possibly be murder? It was ridiculous. Yet, would the police believe her? Might they not believe that she was jealous of Sonia, saw in her a rival for Gerald's affections? That the attack had been the other way round?

Her blood ran cold at the thought.

She remembered that Gerald had hinted about concealment of the body. But that would be wrong. It was much better that the truth should be told. He had said that he would help her, but she knew that was not his true reason. He was a devious—and dangerous—man.

The more her mind dwelt feverishly on the events of the past few hours, the more frightened and bewildered she became. She could feel menace all around her. Gerald had pretended that he wanted to protect her, but it was only for secret reasons of his own. He

didn't want the police investigating Sonia's death. Why not? What had he to hide?

One thing was certain; she must get away from this hateful house, with its mystery, its ghost, its tragedy and menace. She should never have come back. Peter had been right. But that stubborn streak in her make-up, the conviction that she was well able to look after herself, had brought this horror upon her.

"I must get away . . ." she muttered, and got slowly up from the bed.

The room rocked a little as she stood up. A mist whirled before her eyes and she felt a moment's nausea. Her legs felt rubbery, drained of all strength. She stood holding on to the wooden chair, steadying herself.

Then, gritting her teeth, she began to dress. Her head was spinning and felt muzzy, but she forced herself to continue dressing. She dared not stay here another minute.

"I'll slip down the back staircase, the one I used earlier," she thought. "I daren't use the front door; they might see me and stop me." She took one quick glance around the room then moved towards the door. She turned the handle, but the door did not open.

Locked!

The fear fluttered back, filling her throat so that she was unable to breathe. She tugged harder, but the door remained closed. She remembered that perhaps Ada Lathom or Mrs. Preston might, by some miraculous chance, still be in the house, and she began to beat her fists against the wooden panels.

"Help! Let me out!—"

Somebody was bound to hear her . . . For sev-

eral minutes she continued to pound upon the door, and just when she began to think she was wasting her time she heard the sound of footsteps coming along the passage. She felt relief flood through her as the steps halted outside her room. She heard the key grate in the lock.

The door opened.

A man stood there, a stranger. Yet there was something familiar about him, as though she had seen him somewhere before. He was colorfully dressed, Carnaby Street fashion, and his lips were drawn back in a smile.

"Well, well," he grinned. "If it isn't the little nurse. All locked up and nowhere to go. Have you been a naughty girl, then?"

He came slowly towards her.

"Look what I found!" grinned Peacock.

He came into the lounge, dragging Mary with him, one hand around her wrists, the other clamped over her mouth. Gerald Winchley turned his head sharply and made a movement as though to get up from his chair, and Mary saw that he was tied to it. He was deathly white and a trickle of blood ran from the corner of his mouth.

Kabri glared. "Stop acting the fool. I told you to search the house."

"I did, and this is what I found."

"Nothing else?"

"There was a safe behind a picture. It wasn't difficult to open."

He half-flung Mary across the Chesterfield. She crouched there, her eyes darting to and fro as though

in search of escape, knowing there was none. Kabri still held his gun and although he did not look at Mary, the muzzle wavered in her direction, warningly. She had a feeling he would not hesitate to shoot.

Kabri looked across at Peacock. "What did you find in the safe?" he asked.

Peacock dropped a deposit book and a key on the coffee table.

"Deposit Box. Zurich 1007377."

"How much?"

Peacock kissed his fingers. "Fifty grand, as they say in the Classics."

Kabri's cold eyes switched back to Gerald.

"You've been spending," he said.

"I told you." Gerald's face was sullen. "I've had expenses. I was ill. I had kidney trouble in Cairo and a heart attack soon after."

"Poor old Percy," said The Peacock. "He's had troubles."

"They're not over yet," Kabri said tonelessly, studying the book and then pocketing it, together with the key.

Gerald shifted uneasily in his chair. "You've got what you wanted," he said. "Now get out and leave me in peace."

"He knows," said Peacock, wide-eyed in mock surprise.

"I think he does."

"He was always quick with his wits," smiled Peacock, winking at Mary. Mary did not respond; she had just glimpsed the body of Max, sprawled in a corner of the room, and her heart was lurching violently. She felt sick with fear and apprehension, not only for

her own sake, but for Gerald's. These two men, whoever they were, had proved their ruthlessness. They had killed once and would not hesitate to kill again.

Gerald was looking at Kabri. "What do you mean?" he muttered.

"You said you wanted peace, and that's what we're here for. To give it to you. R.I.P., in fact."

"No!"

"If you hadn't been such a spendthrift with our money, we'd have brought you a coffin," Peacock said solemnly. "As it is, we'll have to settle for a damp old cellar. Shame . . ."

Gerald said hoarsely. "You don't really mean it, Kabri. You're not a violent man. You never were. This isn't your idea. It's his—" He nodded towards Peacock.

"Of course it is, Percy," said Peacock. "I was most upset when you disappeared with our share of the loot. So was Kabri. All that hard work we'd put in—"

"All right, let's cut out the cackle," said Kabri. "Take him down to the cellar."

"No!—wait!"

"I want to be away from here before dawn," the portly man said coolly. "We can be in Paris for lunch—"

"Kabri, listen to me!" Sweat was rolling down Gerald's neck; the pain was back in his chest, and he looked ten years older. He didn't want to die. He didn't care what it cost him to keep alive; he would give them everything he had, everything. Death had always terrified him. He still remembered the gray, sombre day when the silent-faced men had carried out his father's coffin, his mother weeping on the doorstep.

"I'll make you rich—" he said, then a spasm of pain went across his face. "My pills—they're in my pocket . . ." he gasped.

Mary made instinctively to rise and Kabri's gun forced her back onto the settee. "Please, Mr. Kabri—" she begged.

Something in the way she looked at him, the appeal in her eyes, must have moved him, for he suddenly nodded.

"Very well, but no funny business," he warned.

"You're a fool," said The Peacock. "If he's going to die, let him die. It'll save us the trouble of killing him."

Mary took the little box of pills from Gerald's pocket and put one to his lips. "You'll have to swallow it without water," she said. "Can you manage?"

Fear had dried the saliva in his mouth but he managed to swallow the pill. In a moment or two the color had come back into his face.

"You were going to make us rich, remember?" said Kabri smoothly. "Or are you merely stalling? Because if you are—"

"No, this is on the level!" said Gerald quickly. "The stuff's in a cave beneath the house. I can take you there."

"Stuff? What stuff?" asked Peacock, sharply.

Gerald swallowed convulsively. "Let me explain . . . We met this man in a club in London. We hadn't long arrived in this country. Grogan was his name. I knew him years ago. He'd just bought this place because it was handy for the plane."

"What plane?"

"He was one of a gang shipping stolen gold bullion

abroad by plane. It never arrived. It disappeared without a trace somewhere off this coast. Grogan talked to one of the villagers. He says he saw a plane crash—he was drunk at the time; apparently he's always drunk, and naturally nobody believed him. But Grogan did. He knew from the line of flight that it must have crashed somewhere around here. He was short of money, however, for buying the necessary underwater equipment. That's where we came in—"

"Where is Grogan now?" asked Kabri.

Sweat gleamed on Gerald's forehead. "He—he met with an accident—" His voice trailed off.

Mary was staring at him in mingled horror and dismay. "Grogan!" she said. "He was the man the local people thought had committed suicide—"

"Did he tumble or was he pushed?" grinned Peacock. "Very neat, Percy. Go on, do . . ."

"We bought the place . . . but I didn't have anything to do with . . . killing him. It was Max who pushed him off the tower."

"We believe you, Percy," Kabri said coldly. "You don't have to write a book about it."

"Where's the rest of the gang?" asked Peacock.

"Inside. They were picked up soon after, all except Grogan, who was lying low."

"How much?"

"Close on a quarter of a million."

Kabri whistled. "And you know where it is?"

Gerald nodded eagerly. "We split it three ways. There'll be enough for all of us. Don't you see—it's within our grasp? It's lying out there for the taking. Max traced it. I've marked it on the map. There's a fortune for each of us, just waiting."

He was excited now, the words spilling from his lips, his eyes gleaming.

"Me, I don't believe him," said Peacock. "He's playing for time. You know our Percy by this time, surely? He wriggles like an eel." He transferred his gaze to Gerald. "You want time to think how you can outsmart us, don't you? Like you did over that job in Boston. We photographed the blueprints, and you cleared off with the cash."

"Peacock could be right," said Kabri. "All this talk about a plane crashing into the sea, loaded with gold bullion . . . It's a little too fanciful for my liking."

"But it's true!" panted Gerald. "Max has been working on the scheme for weeks. He's been out most days from the cave, searching for it. Yesterday he located the plane—he told me so. I tell you, Kabri, it's all there. I'm on the level. And I need your help as much as you need mine."

"He's got a point there," said Kabri. "If he really is telling the truth."

"I'd hate to kill him—and then find out he was right," muttered Peacock.

Kabri pinched his nose reflectively. He extracted a cigar from his case, lit it slowly, puffed luxuriously. The fragrant aroma of expensive tobacco hung on the air.

"You say you've got this spot marked on a map?"

"Yes."

"Where is the map?"

For the first time Gerald smiled. "Come off it," he said bluntly. "If I tell you, you'll kill me. You can't beat it out of me because if you killed me, you'd never

know. And there's another matter of finding the cave we operate from. You'd never find it alone."

"All right." Kabri jerked his head. "Untie him, Peacock."

Peacock did so reluctantly. "I wouldn't trust him an inch," he said. "Don't you try anything, Percy boy, or it'll be the last thing you do."

Outside the door Peter had been listening intently. Now he had heard enough. There was a bleak expression on his face as he stepped into the lounge.

The occupants swung to face him. He held a gun in his hand, and it was rock steady.

"Peter!" gasped Mary, relieved and amazed at the same time.

Kabri found his voice. "Who the hell are you?"

"Never mind who I am. Drop your guns, the pair of you."

Peacock's eyes were smouldering. Slowly he dropped his gun to the carpet and Kabri followed suit.

"Back up against the wall. Quickly now!" Peter's voice cut like the crack of a whip.

Sullenly the two men obeyed. And it was then Peacock saw his chance. For a moment Kabri's portly bulk hid him from Peter's eye, and the levelled gun he held.

Peacock moved like a flash. He grabbed the startled girl from the settee and jerked her in front of him. His free hand dived to his pocket and came out holding a razor-edged flick-knife. In a second the blade was glittering at her throat.

"The choice is yours, Mister-Whoever-you-are. Drop that gun or I'll cut her throat. And don't think

I'm bluffing. Our friend Max lies dead over there—shot, you'll notice . . . by yours truly."

Only for a moment did Peter hesitate. He knew that he was beaten. He dropped the gun.

"That's better," said Peacock.

Kabri had already snatched up his own gun. Now he stepped forward and brought it down viciously upon Peter's skull. Mary screamed involuntarily as Peter fell in a heap.

"Who is he?" demanded Kabri, glaring at Mary. "A policeman?"

"I don't know," Mary said hoarsely. "I honestly don't know."

"Just a hero, eh?" Peacock turned Peter over with his foot, then knelt and ran his fingers through his jacket pockets. "Nothing."

Gerald said: "Put them both in the cellar—and hurry. My cook will be back soon."

"You'll have to help with Max. He'll weigh a ton," said Kabri. "Then you can take us to this cave."

CHAPTER 17

When Peter came round he was lying on the cellar floor, and Mary was seated beside him. He realized that his head was splitting and pain stabbed behind his eyes. When he tried to sit up he found that his arms had been tied tightly behind his back.

"Give me a hand, Mary," he muttered. "Get these ropes off—"

"I can't," she said. "They tied me up, too."

He turned his head and saw that her hands had also been bound behind her. He swore softly.

"Well, I made a right mess of that, didn't I?"

"It wasn't your fault," Mary defended him.

"I should have been more on my guard. You're not hurt, darling?"

"No." She hesitated then asked the question which had been trembling on her lips. "Peter, who *are* you? You *knew* they were crooks, didn't you?"

"I suspected it."

"Then you are a policeman?"

"Sort of. A very hush-hush Department in the Ministry of Defense."

She looked puzzled. "I don't understand. Why are you interested in Gerald? Is he a spy?"

"He was an industrial spy before he came to England. They all were, and as you've probably gathered, he double-crossed them and made off with the loot. But that isn't why he came here, or why I'm investi-

gating him. There are certain very secret Naval installations quite nearby, closely connected with the country's defense—underground silos, that sort of thing. Well, we discovered that someone was carrying out certain underwater activities."

"That was Max, according to Gerald—"

"Yes. Well, I've been doing some skin-diving myself. We naturally wondered what he was up to, and I traced him to this house. We concluded they were enemy agents probing an underwater defense system. The other evening, when I found you, I'd been searching the house. I wanted to find out more about these people. I got a photograph of Gerald when you were on the beach with him. We know a great deal about him now, from our opposite numbers in the States. There's a lot more to it, but time for that later." He paused. "Why did they kill Sonia?"

"They didn't. It was an accident." In a faltering voice Mary told him of the desperate struggle which had ended in the girl's death.

"You poor darling," he said, when she had finished. "You've had a pretty rough time of it since you came here, haven't you?"

"Do you think she was the 'ghost,' after all?" Mary asked.

"It's very likely. Knowing that Gerald was keen on you, she probably tried to frighten you away, like she did the other nurse. But we'll never know for sure—unless it walks again."

Mary gnawed her lower lip. "You did say you thought it might have been a man?"

Peter nodded. "You're thnking of Peacock? He's

an effeminate-looking type; he could quite easily pass for a woman, dressed up. He may have heard of the legend from the villagers and hit on the idea of dressing up while he was prowling round the house. But I hardly think he'd go to the length of trying to kill you. I still think it was Sonia, especially in view of what happened afterwards on the tower."

"But I'd have recognized her! That face I saw—"

"There are such things as masks, make-up. If she wanted you to see her—and she obviously did—she'd make sure she was unrecognizable, wouldn't she? As Sonia, I mean."

Mary nodded. Then she said: "I'm glad we're together, Peter."

"So am I, darling. The only thing is, I can't kiss you."

"What I meant was, that once they've located the gold they'll come back . . . and they'll kill us. We can identify them, and we know too much about them. They'd get life imprisonment for Max's death, in any case."

His jaw jutted. "Don't be such a defeatist, darling. We're a long way from being dead yet. I suspect Winchley has a couple of underwater sleighs to transport the gold, but that's still going to take time. They may need help. They won't trust Gerald any further than they can see him; he's double-crossed them once and could do it again. My own theory is that once they've got the gold they'll kill him, anyway." But—" he added, "I don't intend to stay here. We've wasted enough time as it is."

She watched as he wriggled his way across the stone floor towards an ancient dressing-table mirror

propped against the far wall. He kicked it, and it shattered into several razor-sharp fragments.

"Seven years bad luck," Mary said, trying to smile.

"For them, yes."

He closed his bound hands around one of the pieces of glass.

Then he made his way back to where Mary sat.

"Now, turn your back and hold out your fingers. Be careful not to cut yourself, hold it firmly, so that I can try to saw these ropes off."

"But you'll hurt yourself!"

"Can't be helped. Just so long as I don't sever an artery—" He grinned. "I should worry, with a qualified nurse right here with me!"

"Don't!" she protested, knowing how easily it could happen.

She held the piece of glass as firmly as she could and felt him sawing his ropes against it. Once or twice he drew in his breath sharply and she knew that he had gashed himself. Her own fingers were aching from the strain.

Fifteen minutes passed. Every now and then Peter paused to strain his wrists against the ropes. Each time they held. Sweat stood out on his forehead in little droplets, and Mary had bitten her lower lip until it was sore.

Still the ropes would not yield.

The cavern was lit by two storm lanterns which stood on one of the packing cases. Shadows leapt and dance grotesquely on the rocky walls. Kabri and Peacock had examined the packing cases and made a careful study of the underwater equipment—sleighs,

oxygen cylinders, masks, wet suits. It was all there, everything necessary to salvage the sunken gold and bring it back to the cave.

Now they were studying the map which Gerald had given them, spreading it out on one of the packing cases.

Kabri had still not been convinced that Gerald was telling the truth until he had produced the map and shown them the equipment. He had believed, like Peacock, that he was playing for time.

"We'll need help," Peacock grumbled now. He could see that he was going to be responsible for the donkey-work, and hard work was something he had little relish for.

"We'll get it," said Kabri. "I know a couple of pals who will jump at the chance of a little gold-fishing. They were both frogmen during the war. I'll phone them when we go back upstairs."

Peacock grinned. "That's right, put it on Percy's bill."

"There's just one other thing we have to do," said Kabri casually.

Gerald looked uneasy. He licked his lips. "What's that?"

"We need a launch to get rid of those two—we'll dump them where they'll never be found. We'll do it now and get it over with."

"My launch is in the next cave," Gerald said.

"Good, then we'll take a little trip, all three of us. The night air will do us good."

Kabri gave Peacock a quick, significant look which, fortunately for Gerald's peace of mind, he did not see.

"Come on, let's go," said Gerald impatiently.

When they came into the cellar a few minutes later, however, the cellar was empty, the door open.

Peacock's face contorted into a snarl of fury. An oath burst from his lips.

"They're gone! Damn it, they've got free!"

Kabri glared. "You told me those ropes would hold a horse—"

Peacock was leaping towards the cellar door, Gerald behind him, Kabri bringing up the rear. It was then that Peter leapt out from behind the pile of furniture against the door. One blow sent Kabri to the floor, his gun dropping with a clatter.

Peter dived for it and snatched it up. He bounded through the open doorway in pursuit of Gerald and Peacock. Peacock was ahead, and he turned at the end of the corridor, his gun raised. A bullet whined past Peter's head, missing him by inches, and spattering him with dust as it slammed into the wall. There was another shot, and another.

"Keep back!" Peter shouted as he felt Mary come up behind him. "Just make sure Kabri doesn't come round. Find a chair leg, anything, and use it if necessary."

He fired, heard someone cry out, then the sound of running feet, disappearing into the distance. He bounded along the corridor, jumping over Gerald, who lay sprawled on the ground, his eyes closed, an ugly stain spreading over his chest. Whether by accident or design—probably design—the Peacock's last bullet had hit him.

Two more shots rang out suddenly in the main entrance hall.

"What the—"

Peter paused, then edged cautiously along the passage into the hall. Then he lowered his gun in astonishment and relief. Peacock was huddled on the floor, his face pasty-white, his eyes staring in the finality of death. A party of Naval ratings, led by a young officer with a black beard, was advancing across the hall.

"Radnor! I didn't expect to see you!" Peter's expression was a mixture of incredulity and pleasure. He pocketed the gun then turned towards Mary, who had followed him along the corridor. A professional glance at Kabri before she did so had assured her that he would not awaken for a long time. Peter's fist must have had the force of a piston-blow, she thought.

Peter put his arm comfortingly around Mary, then turned to Radnor again. "What the blazes brought you here—just when you were most needed?" he asked.

"I did," came a voice from the back of the hall. Into sight came Aunt Freda.

"Aunt!"

"Mrs. Jackson!"

It was difficult to say who was the most astonished —Peter or Mary.

She stood there, small and fragile-looking, but triumphant.

"When you didn't come back with Mary I had a feeling something had gone wrong. So I rang the Naval Base. Did I do the right thing?"

"You're absolutely marvellous!" grinned Peter. "You *always* do the right thing."

It was two days later. Two warm, sunny days in

which Mary had relaxed at Aunt Freda's cottage and tried to forget the horror and the terror of the last week.

She had only seen Peter in the evenings, for he had been busy assisting the local C.I.D. with their investigations, helping to recover the stolen bullion from the seabed.

Now, with the red ball of the sun sinking below the horizon, they strolled along the lane which ran past the cottage.

"I would have suggested the beach," Peter said, "but that would have meant seeing Seacliff House again, and I've a feeling you'd rather not."

She nodded. "I don't think I ever want to see it again, Peter."

"There's talk of demolishing it, and I'm all for the idea. The place is falling to pieces, anyway. I don't think anybody would want to buy it, not after all that's happened there, and the publicity."

"They found the Weasel's body, didn't they?" she asked quietly.

"Yes. It was in a secret cupboard behind the wall, above your bedroom. That was where the blood—" He stopped suddenly, seeing her white face. "What a tactless idiot I am! Kiss me, darling, just to show that you forgive me."

They kissed. Presently he said, "What have you been doing with yourself today?"

"Just resting. But I had a visit from the insurance company about the bullion. They seem to think I had a hand in recovering it for them. Of course, I told them it was nonsense. That you—"

Peter smiled to himself. The insurance company

had contacted him first, telling him that there would be a reward, but he had stoutly denied being concerned in its recovery. Mary had done everything, he stated; he had only appeared on the scene at the last moment.

He said now, "I expect they want to give you a reward. It may be a considerable one, too."

"I don't want it. It belongs to you, Peter. You're more entitled to it than I am."

"Nonsense. It's yours, or will be, and you're to hang on to it."

"Then I insist you share it with me."

"I wouldn't dream—"

"You'll have to, if you're going to marry me," she said demurely. "Or perhaps you don't want to, now that I'm going to be a rich woman."

They had stopped beneath the leafy green of an old chestnut tree. The sky was red and golden. The hum of bees filled the air.

"You know I do. But I'll admit the money may be a drawback. You'll be a very wealthy girl—"

"But not a happy one," she said, "unless you're with me, Peter."

"My darling—" Suddenly she was in his arms. "You know there's nothing I want more."

With his lips on hers, his arms protectively about her, Mary knew that the terror of the past was gone forever; that there was only the future to look forward to, as radiant as the evening sunlight which lay all around them.

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Blood in the night...

Seacliff House was ancient, a crumbling ruin threatening to fall into the sea. The locals avoided it, claiming that at best it was a house of evil and at worst—they shuddered, and quickly changed the subject. But Mary James could not change her mind so readily. She had accepted the job as nurse to Gerald Winchley in a desperate attempt to escape from London and she could not let the fears of superstitious natives drive her back to the city. Then the first murder was committed, and the blood ran free in the night. Was it a harbinger of things to come—or was it intended as a special warning to Mary? For the murderer—or murderers—would not be content to stop now . . . and Mary seemed marked to be their next victim!

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